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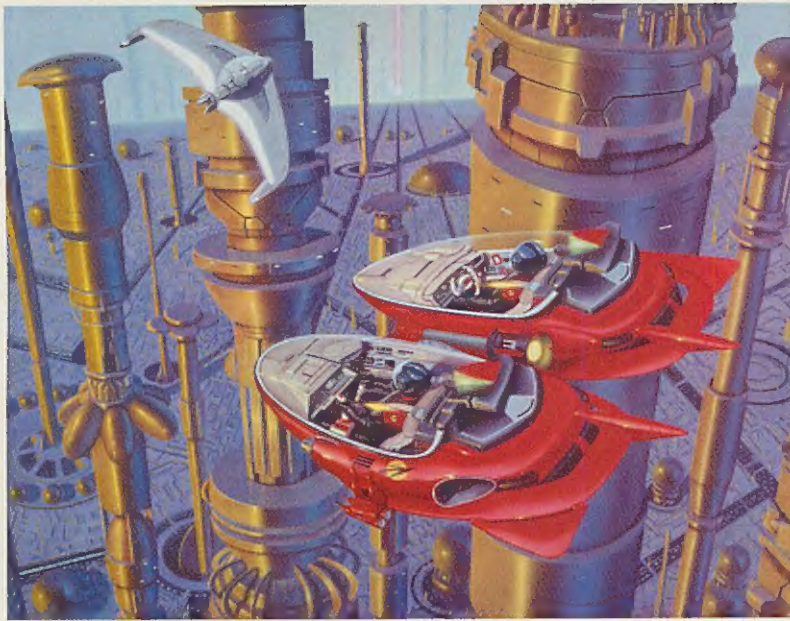
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COVER: A spaceship uses chaos theory for faster than light travel. Art by Vincent Di Fate. ABOVE: A detail from Steve Youll's cover art for Isaac Asimov's Foundation and Empire. To view more of Steve's art see this issue's Gallery beginning page 74.

SCIENCE FICTION AGE

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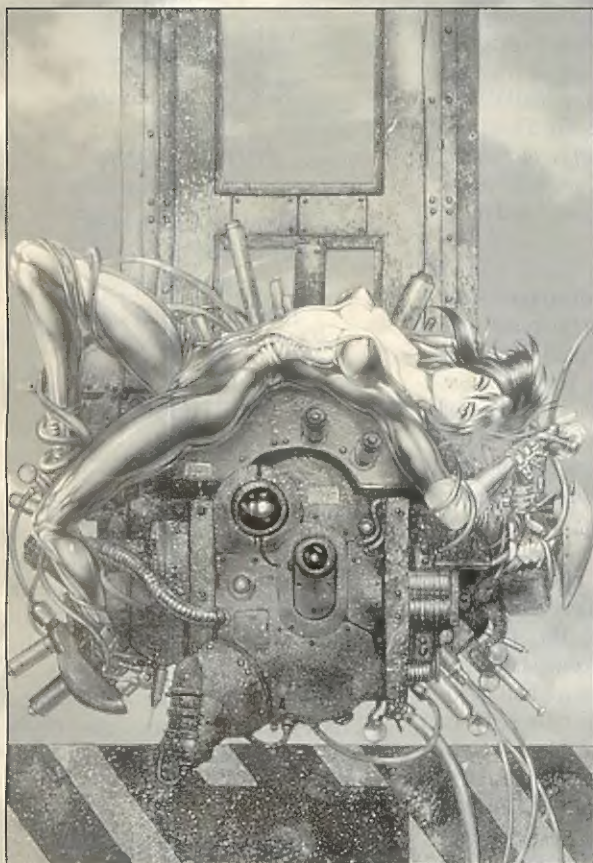
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Interplanetary passengers aboard the *Mauritania* paid to be spoiled, not murdered. That's where Detective Burke came in.

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Dear Mr. Edelman,

I concur with the *SF Age* editorial (March 1996) on appreciating the old masters of the genre while they are still with us. These pioneering authors toiled in the days before paperbacks were prevalent, and their work was published in pulp magazines that paid a mere pittance. In an era when the genre was regarded as a literary ghetto, they produced some of the most imaginative fiction of the twentieth century. Praise them now, for one day they will all be gone.

My favorite story the March issue was Charles M. Saplak's wonderful "Brain Artist: A Romance," a melancholy tale of a struggling young comic book artist and his love affair with an enigmatic artist of incredible talent. As a long-time comic book aficionado, I enjoyed the references to great artists like Kirby, Eisner, Ditko, Moebius, and others. The story's sad conclusion was a testament to the immense power of love and the strange sacrifices it can inspire.

Timothy Walters

As a comic book fan myself who eventually went on to script superhero, SF, and horror comics for both Marvel and DC, I, too found Saplak's references enjoyable. He managed to mold my fond memories into a work of art that was a wonderful commentary on art itself, and the mystifying nature of love.

Dear Editor:

I really like your magazine. I have every issue since November 1992. The cover art and the pictures throughout the magazine are very beautiful. I like the stories you have also. They really stick in my mind after I read them. I love your magazine for its individual identity and its overall look.

For the past twenty years, since 1975, I have been writing poetry. I have around fifty poems that I've written (none of them published). Recently, I started writing a story. It's sort of a fiction with some science in it also. I'm not sure how long it will be.

How can I find out if you could publish my story if and when I finish it? Does it have to be a long or a short story? Does it cost me anything to get it published if it's good enough?

Very sincerely,
Johnny R. Garret

Far from charging authors to be published in our pages, we are always desperately on the look-out for exceptional works of fiction, and reward quite handsomely those who are lucky enough to pen those accepted. The competition is fierce, however. As an example, the stories you see in this latest issue were

culled from almost 1,000 short stories received and read by the editor during a two-month period. To put yourself in competition with those writers, ask for our editorial guidelines by sending a self-addressed stamped envelope to Sovereign Media, 441 Carlisle Dr., Herndon, VA 22070. Then just send your story to the post office box listed below, including a stamped self-addressed envelope if you want a response. Good luck!

Dear Gentlebeings,

I tire of criminally ignorant dilettantes who pose as SF fans. They consider their own particular obsession within the field the be-all and end-all of science fiction. You know the type. They can relate the exact stardate of Kirk's first bowel movement as captain of the *Enterprise*, but they haven't a clue about who Alfred Bester, Horace Gold, Edmond Hamilton, Edd Cartier, Virgil Finley, and Richard Powers are.

That is why I give three cheers to Mr. Hartwell, whose excellent Gallery article was enjoyed and appreciated by this Powers enthusiast. I hope your magazine shall continue to publish such informative and fascinating features. In this way, new readers heretofore unfamiliar with the talents I mentioned, and many others too numerous to list, will be introduced to authors and artists whose works deserve discovery by each generation of fans. There's ample room in the bookstores for reprinted classics to be placed alongside current novels. (Incidentally, my favorite Powers covers adorn *Balantine 46* [1953]; *Sturgeon's More Than Human* and *Signet S1493* [1958]; *Asimov's End of Eternity*.)

Please keep up the good work. Fortunately, with your help, ignorance is a curable condition.

Best Regards,
Sean Donnelly

Dear Scott:

Science Fiction Age continues to entertain with each issue. The new Alternative Media column is a nice addition — its strong visual appeal should help hook the casual bookstand browser.

The fiction, as always, remains excellent, and it's fun to see book reviews from my fellow Maine resident, Elizabeth Hand. You continue to put together a terrific package!

Best wishes,
Bruce Canwell

Readers—please let us know how we're doing at: Letters to the Editor, Science Fiction Age, P. O. Box 369, Damascus, MD 20872, or E-mail to S.Edelman1@Genie.Geis.Com.

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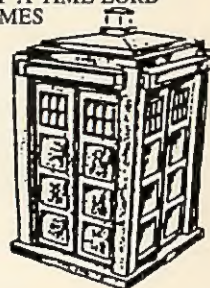
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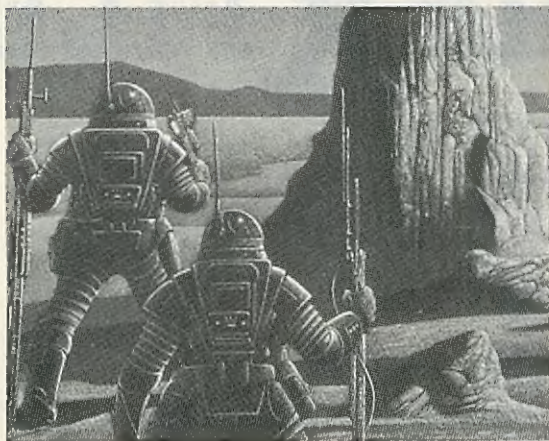
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The readers have spoken, and chosen their favorites from 1995.

Pete D. Manison's "V.R. Marsbase 1" was voted favorite novelette by S.F. Age readers. Art by David Beck.



SCIENCE FICTION FANDOM LOVES ITS ACRONYMIC jargon, as do all specialized communities. A special language develops at which outsiders can only guess. There's TANSTAAFL (There Ain't No Such Thing As A Free Lunch), for example, and FIAWOL (Fandom Is A Way Of Life). You'd know what these meant if you were a SMOF (take a guess now) — a Secret Master of Fandom. SMOFs are the unelected congress that make things happen in SF. SMOFs help organize conventions, run fan clubs, lobby networks to avoid the cancellation of favored TV shows, and make up large voting blocks of those who decide who wins awards.

Well, those of you who have acted liked SMOFs have spoken, as we asked you to, and I can now report on your favorite fiction of 1995. Hundreds of you have mailed in your postcards to express your favorite novella, novelette, and short story.

Your choices for favorite novellas were:

"Acts of God," by Ben Bova: The continuing adventures of Sam Gunn have been appearing from Bova's pen for years. This time, the astronaut who always has an angle decided to take on the Pope himself, deciding that since the space disasters which were costing him a fortune were being blamed by insurance agencies on the titular acts of God, that it was time for him to confront God's representative on Earth. Throw in terrorists and a trip to the Moon, and you have a typical Bova treat.

"Spondulix," by Paul Di Filippo: Reader feedback on our runner-up novella has been sublime, comparing Di Filippo's creation to the works of Thomas Pynchon, Mark Helprin, and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. Readers were entranced with the motley crew that populated a not too distant New Jersey, changing the course of history with the new form of money that became the tale's title. Few science fiction stories tackle economics as their means of extrapolation, an additional attraction.

These are your choices for favorite novelette:

"VR Marsbase 1," by Pete D. Manison: Mars is a favorite destination of SF fans these days, and Manison's visit to a virtual red planet was the reader's choice. The

tale was a mix of mysticism and mania as a team of astronauts on Earth began to believe that their Martian training station was Mars itself. Manison published two stories in our pages last year, and his short story entry, "Let Sleep Not Divide Us," also placed highly in that category's polling, though not in the top three.

"The Wave," by Scott McKay: McKay has a foot in both the worlds of SF and mysteries, for he has also published in *Ellery Queen's*, but readers thought enough of his novelette to make it the runner-up. He created a pilot, living in a world where Robert Kennedy was president and the Vietnam War still raged, who had to chase his wife and daughter through a series of alternate worlds before finally erasing the scientific disaster that sought to keep them apart.

In the short story category, we present the top four contenders. We had intended to let you in on the top three but a tie for third place forced us to add another story to the list:

"The Ogre's Wife" by Richard Parks: In a surprise move, you chose one of our fantasy stories as your favorite short story of the year. In previous years, we published SF by Parks, but it was this classical fantasy of his that attracted your attention and adulation. He turned an old-time tale of Beauty and the Beast on its head and created a moving story of love, trust, and redemption.

"Spearmint," by Batya Swift Yasgur: I was intrigued to see that so many readers like Yasgur's tale of science gone wrong, because immediately upon its publication it became a very controversial tale. Some readers objected to the fact that the story placed a child in a danger, but enough readers enjoyed Yasgur's ability to inhabit the mind of that child that her story placed second in our poll.

"Sweet Bells Jangled" by Martha Soukup: "A Defense of the Social Contracts," Soukup's previously published story in *SF Age*, won last year's Nebula Award for Best Short Story from the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America. It's too soon to know how well her latest story for us fared in those awards, but it garnered a sufficient number of votes to tie for third place in our own readers' poll. Soukup's evocative story of memes run wild was elegantly told and widely discussed.

"Things Fall Apart" by Daniel Hood: Hood's first published story with us, "The Wealth of Kingdoms," was reprinted in Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling's *Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*. His SF story of the end of civilization reminded readers of Robert Sheckley's social satires as it delineated a future in which people's lack of belief in the world's physical laws spells doom, until an inventive professor figures out how to reverse it all.

And as we promised, three of you have had your postcards pulled at random, and will each be sent a box full of assorted recent books and prepublication galley. The lucky winners are Susan Busse, Linda Schwartz, and Jessica C. Young. Thank you all for your help.

That's it for last year. Pay close attention to 1996, so that when we next ask you for your rankings, you too can become a SMOF. □

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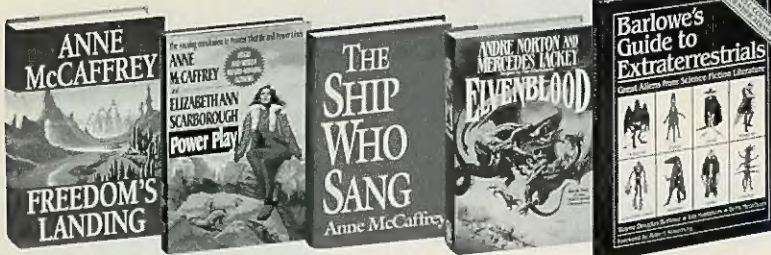
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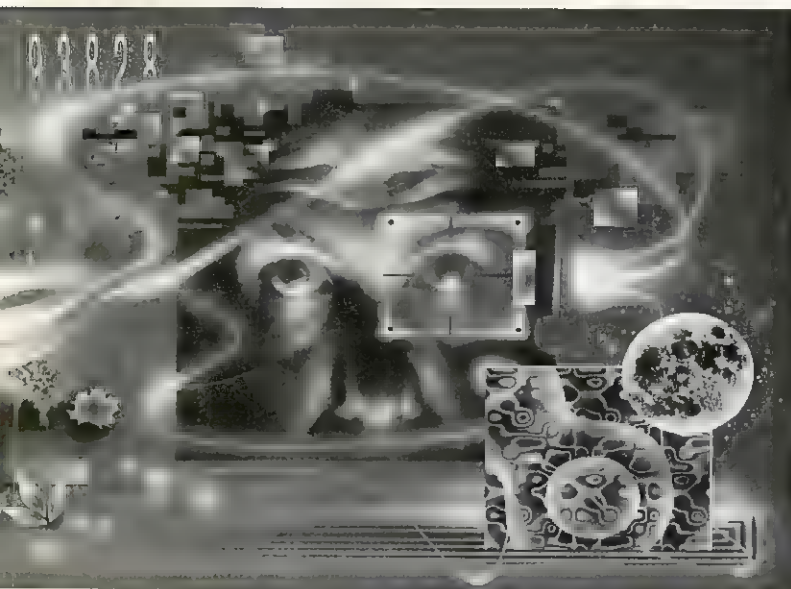
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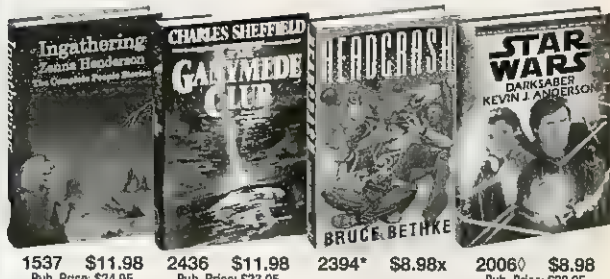
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BOOKS

By Paul Di Filippo, Richard Parks, and Elizabeth Hand

Bisson discovers literary fire with aliens, wars, and space-dwelling whales.



Artist Bob Eggleton perfectly captures Terry Bisson's ambitious space romp in his cover painting for *Pirates of the Universe*.

ONE OF THE BIGGEST KICKS THAT A READER intent on following an ambitious and talented author's career can have is watching him or her change and develop. The best writers among us are constantly offering surprises, new transfigurations of their abiding style and concerns.

Terry Bisson certainly qualifies as a writer of sufficient craft and heart to make us eagerly anticipate the next milestone on his novelist's pilgrimage. And when we pick up his latest book, *Pirates of the Universe* (Tor Books, hardcover, \$22.95, 320 pages), we find a deeply rewarding novel that is different from anything he's previously done, yet still authentically Bisson.

Bisson first appeared with *Wyrdmaker* (1981), a hallucinogenic concoction that mixed Lovecraft's *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath* (1943) with the ambiance of Moorcock's *Elric* series. This was followed by the book that seemed to crystallize an image for Bisson: *Talking Man* (1986). In this tender, silly, wild, somber, trailer-park fantasy, we saw Bisson's soon-to-be-familiar concerns emerge: cars; the American South; quirky, marginalized characters; and the quest for a more perfect world. Bisson's language seemed to have reached some kind of personal apex, boasting a poetic simplicity laced with down-home metaphors and similes and skewed observations on the meaning of life.

The follow-up to *Talking Man* was *Fire on the Mountain* (1988). While on one level this new book could be interpreted as a literal sequel, on another it could not have been more different. Quiet and reflective, its events strictly constrained in time and place, *Fire* was a soulful meditation on the racial issues that have long plagued the U.S., reminiscent at times of Howard Waldrop's uchronias.

Around this time, Bisson began to write his first short fiction work, soon collected in *Bears Discover Fire* (1993). It was in these stories that Bisson's expansive and transformative urges really became apparent. While many of the stories — such as the award-winning title piece — continued to play with the old Bisson tropes, others showed movement toward pointed satire and social commentary. Bisson's whimsy acquired a harder edge. Additionally, he experimented with form, casting some stories solely in dialogue form, a technique used with good results in portions of the current novel.

Bisson's most recent novel until now, *Voyage to the Red Planet* (1990), remains unread by me. Yet, if we can trust the ever-perceptive John Clute, who labels it a combination of "spoof and elegy," Bisson had firmly set his feet on the path to his current book even then.

Pirates of the Universe, while being unambiguously a Terry Bisson book, shares some literary genes with a number of surprising ancestors. It features some of Philip K. Dick's surreal mindgames. It incorporates some of Stanislaw Lem's satiric, philosophical speculations. Even Harry Harrison's *Bill, the Galactic Hero* (1965) would feel at home — or familiarly persecuted — in Bisson's warped future. As for contemporary authors working in the same vein, no one comes more readily to mind than two seriously loony postmodernists: Jonathan Lethem, especially in his new *Amnesia Moon* (1995), and cartoonist Daniel Clowes with his graphic novel, *Like a Velvet Glove Cast in Iron* (1994).

In Bisson's future — which seems to spring in some part from his short story "The Shadow Knows" — much is left unexplained. The reader constantly encounters perplexing, often sardonic bits and pieces of culture and his-

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Owings Mills, Maryland — The National Library of Poetry has just announced that \$24,000 in prizes will be awarded over the next 12 months in the North American Open Amateur Poetry Contest. The contest is open to everyone and entry is free.

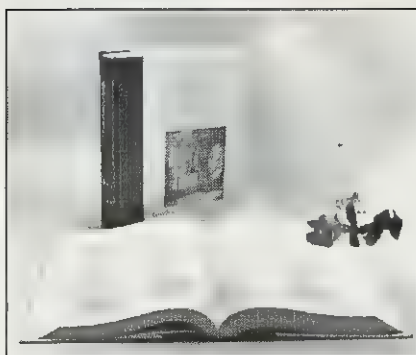
"We're especially looking for poems from new or unpublished poets," indicated Howard Ely, spokesperson for The National Library of Poetry. "We have a ten year history of awarding large prizes to talented poets who have never before won any type of writing competition."

How To Enter

Anyone may enter the competition simply by sending in ONLY ONE original poem, any subject, any style to:

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11419 Cronridge Drive
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Owings Mills, MD 21117

The poem should be no more than 20 lines, and the poet's name and address must appear on the top of the page. "Each poem received will be acknowledged, usually within seven weeks," indicated Mr. Ely. Every poet who enters will receive an evaluation of their artistry.



The Coming of Dawn, featured above, is one of The National Library of Poetry's recent deluxe hardbound anthologies.

World's Largest Poetry Organization

Having awarded over \$90,000 in prizes to over 5,000 poets worldwide in recent years, The National Library of Poetry, founded in 1982 to promote the artistic accomplishments of contemporary poets, is the largest organization of its kind in the world. Anthologies published by the organization have featured poems by more than 100,000 poets. "Our anthologies routinely sell out because they are truly enjoyable reading, and they are also a sought-after sourcebook for poetic talent," said Mr. Ely.

"We're always looking for new poetic talent," he added. "I hope you urge your readers to enter the contest. There is absolutely no obligation whatsoever, and they could be our next big winner."

tory that are presented clearly, but are never explicated. Would you care to guess what "penalty shoes" (a very Vonneguttian phrase) and "wing meat" are? Like a visitor to a strange country, the reader must simply accept much at face value. This technique succeeds in making the whole narrative exquisitely bizarre, while all the surface action remains completely coherent.

On Earth, the years are now numbered in the 500s, despite the fact that many people and structures from our own era still survive. A surface and orbital war known as "the Three" that left many institutions and countries devastated has fitfully tapered off with the arrival of aliens. These are the enigmatic "peteys," vast space-dwelling whalelike creatures who do not quite inhabit our space-time. The peteys currently are being exploited by a corporate hybrid of two familiar names, Disney-Windows. Space Rangers employed by D-W flense the peteys' flesh, which is turned into garments, currency, and other products. Veteran Rangers are entitled to retirement in the pristine and plastic, epcotlike orbital habitat known as "Pirates of the Universe."

Our protagonist is one such Ranger, Gunther "Gun" Ryder. The novel is the story of his radicalization and hegira. From an unassuming corporate tool, Gun becomes something of a free man — thanks to his outlaw brother, Gordon — and eventually participates in an ambiguous liberation/enslavement of the peteys — a climax that literally involves turning a universe or two inside out!

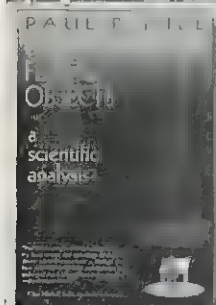
Along the way, Bisson presents a shattered, comic world ruled by inequality and unfairness. Gun, who is a mild, thoughtful, basically honest type, lovingly drawn, is stripped of his perks and status and is forced to rely on the mercies of holographic bureaucrats, artificial people known as gens, and chimeric dogs called doggits. He has a virtual girlfriend who won't put out, a family of hillbilly oddballs, and a real girlfriend whose choice of erotic literature is a promotional flyer for *Pirates of the Universe*. With a nature sweeter than this ill treatment merits, Gun manages to do the right thing, while taking the reader along for a splendid themepark ride.

John Clute recently labeled Jonathan Lethem an "aftermath writer, one of those who does SF after it died, who shores fragments. [His] refusal to give any generic grounds of explanation is ... clearly part of postmodern SF's transgressive attitude toward boundary maintenance." In this book, Terry Bisson fruitfully erodes SF's boundaries even further.

Bellwether, by Connie Willis, Bantam, 247 pages, \$11.95.

The word "beloved" has been attached to Connie Willis and her work so often that to actively dislike one of her novels seems on a par with spitting on the flag, or admitting that you hate *The Wizard of Oz* (equal points for book or movie). So, for the record: I've always enjoyed Willis' short fiction, especially

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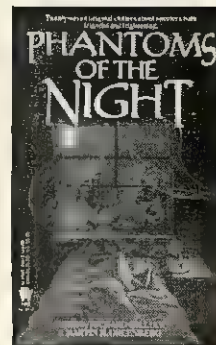
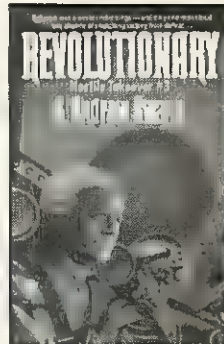
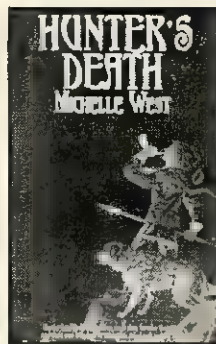
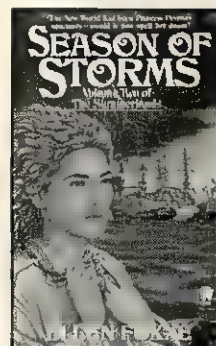
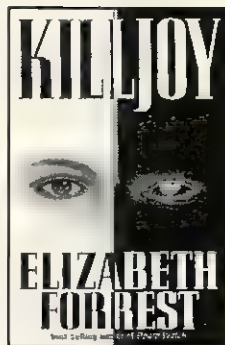
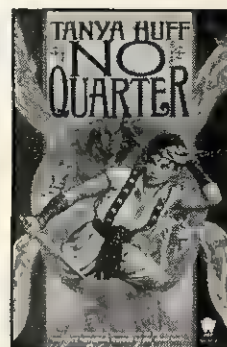
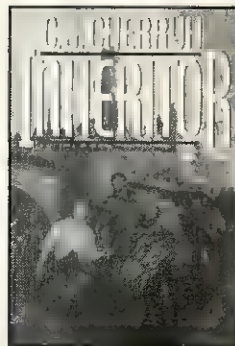
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"At the Rialto," her dizzy loop-the-loop round quantum theory. My fond memories go back to reading "Blued Moon" in *Asimov's* in 1984 when I should have been working, and over the years I've probably lost a few more hours to her short stories — time well-spent, I should add. I haven't read *Lincoln's Dreams* or *Firewatch*, generally considered to be not only her best works but classic novels. I *did* read *Doomsday Book*. I found it leaden and contrived, but figured the fault, Dear Willis, was with myself, since it went on to win the Hugo and Nebula awards.

So when *Bellwether* crossed my desk I thought, How fortunate! I have another chance to like a new Connie Willis book! And so I do; it's just not *this* book.

Bellwether seeks to do for chaos theory what "At the Rialto" did for contemporary physics and the uncertainty principle. Sandra Foster is a thirty-something statistician in the R&D department of a nebulous corporation called HiTek. She's researching fads, looking for the sociocultural equivalent of the Big Bang, the Prime Mover whose vision, popularity, and bad taste spur the rest of us to buy Hula Hoops, Jingle Jumps, and Rubik Cubes, and to iron, tease, or otherwise torture our hair, or any other part of our bodies.

Sandra's particular Rosetta Stone is that unknown individual who first bobbed her hair in the early part of this century. To this end, Sandra peruses newspaper clippings and computer records, with no help whatsoever from her assistant, a workplace-challenged young woman named Flip. Elsewhere in HiTek's labyrinth of corporate cubicles, a chaos theoretician named Bennet O'Reilly is trying to get funding for his own research, which involves rhesus monkeys. One does not have to be a rocket scientist, or even dress like one at SFFWA meetings, to figure out that Sandra and Bennet are going to meet, cute or otherwise, and that their research is going to dovetail somewhere before fadeout.

Now, this isn't exactly a poppin' fresh setup. *Bringing Up Baby* comes to mind, and at least one Thomas Dolby song; also untold numbers of "humorous" SF stories published in the 1950s. I admit I found *Bellwether's* premise hard to stomach, and the opening chapters failed to amuse me at all. Nothing amused me, actually, until page 34, where Willis gets off a good acronym at a staff meeting, but humor is entirely subjective, so maybe you'll think this is all a scream. I did not.

Part of it is simply that Willis is just trying too hard. Satire is what closes on Saturday night, but with *Bellwether* the author seems grimly determined to settle in for a long, long run. Unfortunately, two hundred and forty-seven pages of this is about two hundred too many. The writers' club that admits humor novelists is very, very small: Flann O'Brien, P.G. Woodhouse, S.J. Perelman, a handful of others. Just about everybody else should stick with the odd tale that makes us laugh, a la Woody Allen or Fran Liebowitz — or Connie Willis. Boiled down to its pop culture

ingredients — trendy theories, the theory of trends — *Bellwether* could have been a charming short story. Instead it is tedious. Brief summaries of fads and scientific discoveries are no substitute for plotting, no matter how quaint the fads or curious Roentgen's relationship with his CRT may be. The romance factor, too, is way off. Bennett O'Reilly piques Sandra because he is utterly oblivious of, and seemingly impervious to, fashion. But Bennett isn't much more than bad window-dressing, a bunch of polyester clothes and lousy ties hung on a wire coat hanger down in HiTek's biology department. Ditto Flip, slacker youth writ small with tattoos and dopey hair.

Youth in general gets a bad rap here. Most of the Idiots on Parade in *Bellwether* are young, which makes Willis sound a little like Paul Lynde singing "Kids" in *Bye Bye Birdie*. And the trends satirized are pretty far from cutting edge — stairmasters, Power Rangers, coffee bars, tragically hip restaurants, Barney, chaos theory itself. (Lynn Margulis or Rupert Sheldrake: now, *that's* funny.) Still, there are a few nuggets buried amid all those hula hoops, including a very clever use of Robert Browning's "Pippa Passes" and some nice digs at corporate sensitivity seminars.

Willis' fans are legion, and no doubt make a better audience for her humor than one cranky reviewer. Still, *Bellwether* had two salubrious effects: It made me more determined than ever to get *Lincoln's Dreams*, and it made me reread "At the Rialto." Anyone who doesn't think *that's* a great work has no sense of humor whatever.

Elizabeth Hand

Inheritor by C.J. Cherryh, DAW Books, hardcover, 432 pages, \$21.95.

Inheritor is the third book in a series that began with *Foreigner* and *Invader*, and the title is apt in more ways than one. The third book inherits a rather complex situation created in the first two. When human colonists landed on this planet — called Earth, reasonably enough, by the natives — they encountered the *atevi*, black-skinned humanoids roughly twice the size of normal humans. There are other differences between the two species. Many others. *Atevi* are just not, biologically speaking, *wired* the way humans are. Their emotions are not the same. The lesson is pounded into human foreign service officers again and again: "Atevi are not friends. Atevi can't be friends. They don't like you. They are not capable of liking you. The wiring isn't there."

This doesn't mean that *atevi* don't like humans in particular, but rather that they don't feel affection as humans know it. The *atevi* emotional paradigm is not love or loyalty, but *association* and *man'chi*. The two are as complicated and deeply felt as any human emotion and, in many ways, analogues to human emotions, but they are not the same. Such differences inevitably lead to misunderstanding and the first human-*atevi*

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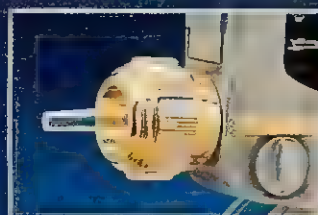
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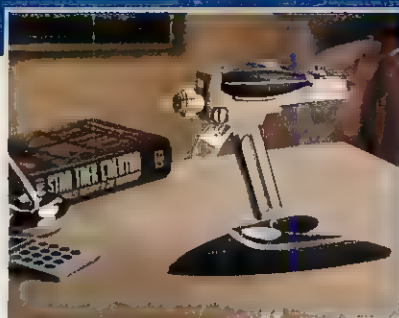
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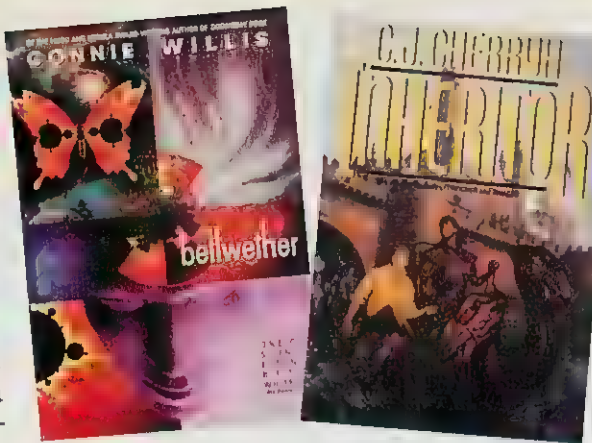
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war, *The War of the Land-*ing. The atevi, despite being barely at a steam engine level of technology, win convincingly, mostly due to inept leadership on the part of the humans and further misunderstandings about what the atevi would or wouldn't do. Under the terms of the treaty established, the human colonists exist separately on the island Mospheira and slowly transfer new technology to the atevi on the main-

land, item by item. The goal is to bring the atevi into technological parity with the humans while tying the two races together by trade and mutual dependence. Toward that end, the *paidhi*, a human officer of the Mospheirian State Department, is extensively trained and given the responsibility of living with the atevi and acting as human/atevi liaison. The situation is complicated enough by conservative, "us first" elements among both humans and atevi, but when the human colony ship returns after a two-hundred-year absence, things get *really* interesting.

This is the situation that Bren Cameron, the human *paidhi*, finds himself in at the opening of *Inheritor*. The colony ship needs the long-abandoned human space station reopened and transport capability to and from the surface (all transport to the surface is one-way, via parachute pods). Neither atevi nor human colonists currently have



that capability, but the atevi are the closest to being able to create it. The ship transmits specs and technical data to the atevi. Where before the human authorities, who had a great deal of leeway under the treaty, could debate for months on the timing of turning over the technology of digital alarm clocks, suddenly the atevi have working computers, the mathematical foundation for folded space and FTL, and the blueprints for a working orbital shuttle. Suddenly the delicate balance so long maintained by the treaty is in danger of collapsing. And there are factions on both sides of the water who would like nothing better than to bring about that collapse.

The situation is grim. Before the book opens, reactionary elements in the human government of Mospheira have attempted to replace Bren as *paidhi* with someone more aligned to their way of thinking. When that

plan fails, the would-be *paidhi*, Deana Hanks, uses her imperfect knowledge of the atevi language and contacts among some of the more conservative atevi lords to sow dissension. The ship has sent its own *paidhi*, one to the human colony and one, Jason Graham, to the atevi. Since the ship folk know nothing of atevi customs, language, or politics, it falls to Bren to teach Jase what he needs to know if Jase is to even survive among the atevi, nevermind working with them and with Bren to get the shuttle flying. The strain of doing his job as liaison — despite, it often seems, his own government's best efforts — and his literally life-and-death impetus to teach Jase are pushing Bren's endurance and nerves to the limit.

As one begins to read *Inheritor*, it's easy for a reader to take this as a strictly political novel — the politics of an alien culture. Even allowing for the fact that this is the third book in the series and the reader needs a little help getting up to speed, most of the action at the beginning is either in the past tense or off-stage. Much time and wordage is spent defining the political situation on Mospheira and the mainland, much thought and narrative given to one tense situation after another. In time, this sense gives way to a new understanding: *Inheritor's* heart is communication, not politics.

Politics is certainly present. Intrigue and alliances are outlined in great detail. But, like many weaving designs, the true pattern is only clear when you see more of it. Likewise Cherryh's pattern is clearer the farther the reader goes into her story: This is a book about how hard real communication truly is. How it can and often does go wrong. And what can happen as a result. All through the book, Bren's biggest challenge is not political intrigue or conflicting biases and interests, but the simple necessity to *understand*.

In many ways, the atevi are the least of Bren's worries. Reaching human to human understanding with the ship-born Jase proves more difficult than Bren has imagined, and understanding the forces and agenda driving the young man from the starship is at least as critical as untangling the complex forces of *association* and *man'chi* that drive the atevi, for reasons that likewise become clear only very late, though all the seeds were planted early and in plain sight of the reader. Deana Hanks, the other human agent at work, proves the old saw about danger and a little knowledge, assuming understanding where there is none.

Cherryh's story is Byzantine in the best sense, with layers on top of layers of motivation at work. It's not meant to be a quick read, so don't hurry. Be patient. Take time to get to know characters like Banichi and Jago and the formidable Ilisidi, grandmother of the ruler of most of the atevi and one who has lived a long time mainly because, as one character puts it delicately to another, some of her enemies are dead. Learn to understand

Continued on page 93

BOOKS TO WATCH FOR

The Two Georges, by Richard Dreyfuss and Harry Turtledove (Tor). The Oscar-winning star of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* and the Hugo-winning best-selling alternate history author collaborate to examine a present-day America still under the sway of the United Kingdom.

Bible Stories for Adults, by James Morrow (Harcourt Brace). Rewriting scripture into SF to understand the divine has long been Morrow's mission, both in our pages and elsewhere. This collection of such tales to date ably demonstrates his irreverent wit.

Paragons: Twelve Master Science Fiction Writers Ply Their Craft, edited by Robin Wilson (St. Martin's). Clarion's founder enlists the help of Joe Haldeman, Howard Waldrop, Karen Joy Fowler, and nine more to teach writers the right stuff with stories and sage advice.

The Jigsaw Woman, by Kim Antieau (Penguin Roc). The editor and publisher of *The Daughters of Nyx*, a magazine of myth-making and fairy tales, turns her hand to the novel. Her Frankensteinlike tale of three women patched into one is both erotic and profound.

The Notebooks of Lazarus Long, by Robert A. Heinlein (Pomegranate Press). The words of wisdom of Heinlein's immortal hero are back. "Always listen to experts," said Long, sounding like his creator. "They'll tell you what can't be done, and why. Then do it."

Virtual Destruction, by Kevin J. Anderson and Doug Beason (Ace). Allen Steele has called this Nebula-nominated duo "the heavyweight tag-team of Hard SF writers." In this near-future novel of Virtual Reality and murder, they pull out the stops to prove him right.

The Microcosmic God: The Complete Short Stories of Theodore Sturgeon Volume 2, by Theodore Sturgeon (North Atlantic Books). The unabridged works of the spiritual father of the SF short story continues with a tome containing at least one of the genre's classics.

Dead Boys, by Richard Calder (St. Martin's). Calder's debut novel, *Dead Girls*, received unprecedented praise from both the SF and mainstream press for the precision of its cyberpunk visions. Revisit 21st Century Bangkok in the trilogy's second installment.

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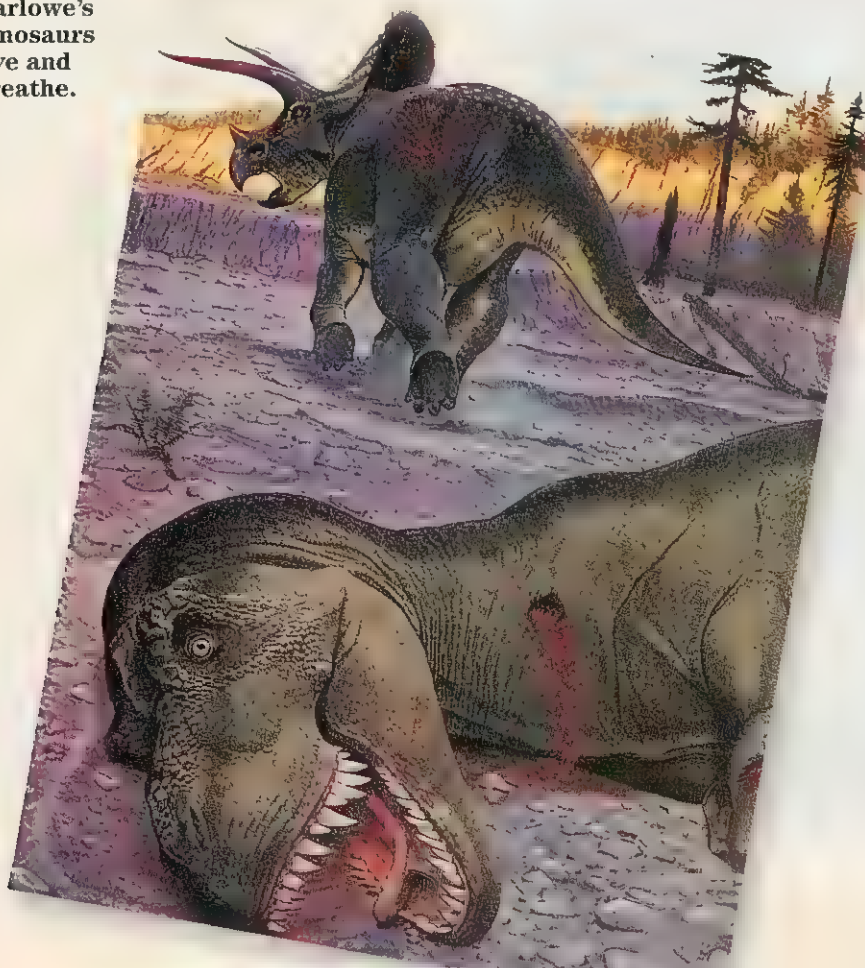
The Extraterrestrials' Guide to Barlowe

DINOSAUR PAINTINGS," SAYS ARTIST Wayne Barlowe, "are the closest I will ever come to time travel." The closest the rest of us will ever come to time travel is to pick up a copy of his recently published retrospective, *The Alien Life of Wayne Barlowe* (Morpheus International), which gathers the cream of the crop of his artistic output to date. As the pages of the oversized volume show, Barlowe has the amazing ability to open a window on the outlandish and make the impossible seem real,

Books

Barlowe's dinosaurs live and breathe.

whether with his canvases of dinosaurs at play, or book covers for authors such as James Blish, Harry Harrison, and Octavia Butler. Barlowe's extensive text provides detailed background on each of his visions. As Vincent Di Fate writes in his introduction, "In today's competitive, compulsive, time-obsessed art field, the illustrator must be nothing less than superman — highly disciplined, remarkably versatile, doggedly consistent, diligently dependable, supremely talented and inventive." Words that perfectly define Wayne Barlowe, as you'll see should you track this volume down at finer book stores, or through the publisher at (310) 859-2557.



May the Cards Be With You

SCIENCE FICTION FANS HAVE LONG BEEN thirsting for a game that will do for SF what *Magic: The Gathering* has done for fantasy role-playing. Various companies have made attempts over the past few years to combine the revolutionary collectible card concept with a fictional cosmic universe able to generate unanimous enthusiasm. While some of these bids have

Collectibles

been intriguing, none seems to have overwhelmingly captured the imagination of gamers and SF fans alike. Thanks to George Lucas' spiritual children, that drought may at last be over. *Star Wars Customizable Card Game* (Decipher, Inc.) goes back to the movie that brought SF to the forefront of the public imagination and sparked the latest pop culture SF craze. Each starter deck contains a mix of 60 cards representing both the Dark and Light sides of the force. The series contains 324 common, uncommon, and rare cards, each illustrated with actual movie footage, but two starter decks are all that is needed for two players to begin. Gamers recreate the action-filled struggle for good and evil as either the Rebel Alliance or Darth Vader's Galactic Empire with cards representing Characters, Weapons, Locations, and other aspects of the classic trilogy. Expansion sets containing fifteen additional cards for customizing your deck are also available. Fans of the series will be pleased to discover that Lucasfilm has allowed the manufacturers to incorporate background details never before seen, as a galaxy far, far away moves to the palm of your hand.

Cybersurfing the World Wide Web

Netscape has released their (semi?) final versions of their excellent WWW browser. Be sure and score your copy at <http://home.netscape.com/comprod/mirror/index.html>, and then use it to pay a

Web World

visit to these recommended home pages:

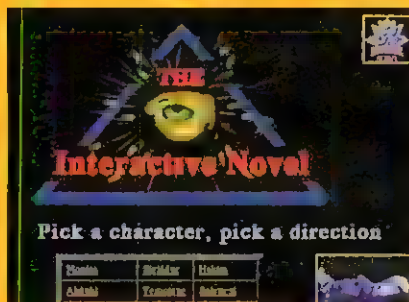
<http://www.panix.com/~rbs/AH/>

Robert B. Schmunk, a NYC-based fan, is the keeper of this impressive and extensive list of alternate-history materials. Included is a chronology of alternate history, an exhaustive bibliography, and historical perspectives on the genre.

http://pathfinder.com/~@ID4W7mE5@AE.AQBKL/twep/Aspect/Octavia/Octavia_Advice.html

Octavia Butler's advice to writers. Don't let the difficult Web address scare you; this is good stuff and worth the typing. <http://www.acy.digex.net/~dobenson/hyper.html>

A "novel" that allows registered users to



add tangents, subplots and sequences.

<http://www.slip.net/~kimono/index.html>

The Mecca of Japanese toy collectors. Based in California, Kimono makes its catalog of bewildering, highly flammable — but nifty — toys available online: Astro Boy, Star-Blazers, Robotech and more. <ftp://ftp.netcom.com/pub/la/lacon3-info/www/lacon3.html>

California is on my mind. I've already started stashing pennies for the trip

to the 54th World Science Fiction Convention in Anaheim, California. This site is a great sneak-peek at this fall's festivities: programming, events, guests of honor, art show, and info on gas, food, and lodging. <http://mud.bsd.uchicago.edu/~mohanraj/balist.html>

When I worked at a science fiction bookstore in Toronto, we were always on the lookout for gay themes in SF&F — several of our customers were avid seekers of such. Mary Anne Mohanraj has posted a lengthy bibliography for the world to use.

<http://www.dnai.com/~ochobbit/>

The Other Change of Hobbit, a West Coast specialty bookstore, has a virtual counterpart who'll help you find a book or story based on a description, with oft-updated lists of what's new in the store, and also used book searches.

Cory Doctorow

Mechanical Memories

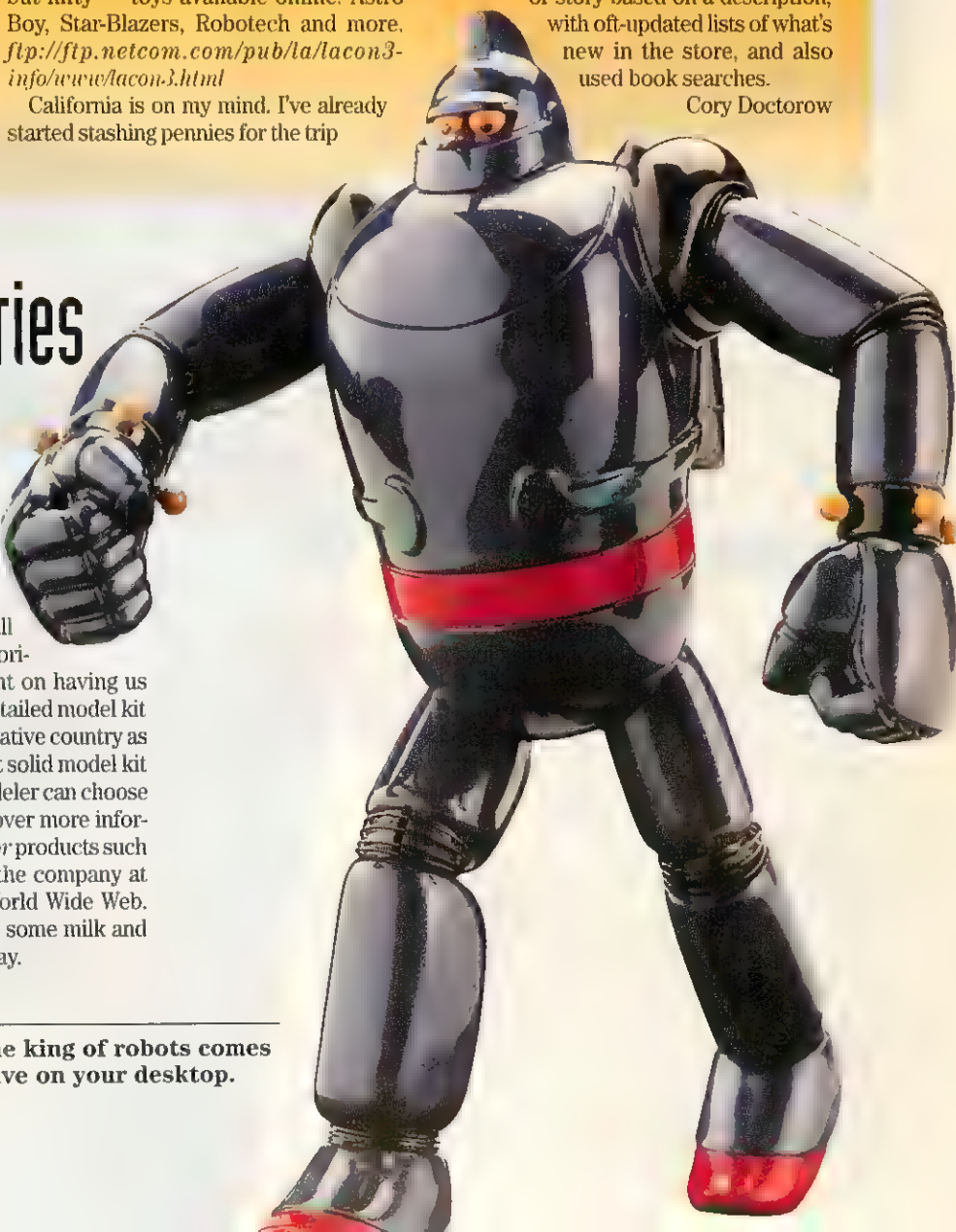
FOR SF FANS OF A CERTAIN AGE, THE name Gigantor conjures up memories of lazy Saturday mornings in front of the TV with milk and cookies, watching a huge animated robot battle evildoers while our parents slept. We were too young to know the words *manga* or *anime*,

Collectibles

but the classic Japanese series invaded our hearts all

the same. But that was then, and this is now. Horizon Inc. and sculptor Sen Maruyama are intent on having us relive those exciting days by creating a highly detailed model kit of that immense mechanical hero known in his native country as *Tetsujin 28-Go* (or "Iron Man #28"). This 27-part solid model kit features ball-joint construction so that each modeler can choose the pose for this legendary robot. You can discover more information about the *Gigantor* kit and other *Gigantor* products such as keychains and pewter figurines by visiting the company at <http://www.wonderweb.com/horizon> on the World Wide Web. Then get out the epoxy and paints and prepare some milk and cookies, because nostalgia isn't just for yesterday.

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Meet A Cosmic ADAMS' FAMILY

CHANCES ARE IF YOU GO TO ONE OF SF's major conventions (such as the upcoming WorldCon in Los Angeles — see elsewhere in this section for its Internet address), you will find at least one fan wandering the halls in the middle

Comics of the day while wearing a bathrobe. Don't panic! It does not mean that said fan is so dazed from the doings of the con that he has staggered from his room in a stupor. It is merely a sign of homage to best-selling author Douglas Adams' *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, whose hero Arthur Dent was snatched away wearing same when Earth was demolished to make way for a galactic freeway. Now you can follow Dent's continuing adventures, along with those of Zaphod Beeblebrox, and the sole surviving Earth-woman Trillian, in the comic book adaptation of *Life, the Universe and Everything* (DC Comics). The third volume in the Hitchhiker's trilogy has been transformed into a graphic story by writer John Carnell and artists Paris Cullins, Neil Vokes, and John Nyberg. Each of the 48-page prestige format issues will be available in comic book specialty stores for \$6.95. In this adventure, the hapless heroes are enlisted by the geriatric Slartibartifast to help save the galaxy from the scourge of dreaded war robots from the planet Krikkit. A motion picture version of Adams' lunacy is in the works, but until then, this is the best way to bring the SF madness to life.



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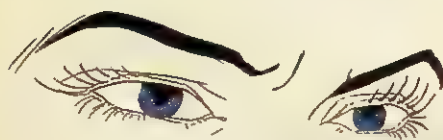
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BEAVIS AND BUTTHEAD WERE NOT the only cartoon icons to spring forth from the animators at MTV. Aeon Flux, female cyber assassin and sexual terrorist battling against a future dictatorship, first appeared in 1995 as a feature on MTV's *Liquid Television* series. Created by Peter Chung, she stalked across a gritty tomorrow like a cross between Modesty Blaise and the Terminator. Battling Chairman Trevor Goodkind's plans to erase history and consolidate his world power, she is neither hero nor villain. Now she is available in bookstores across the country as the subject of *Aeon Flux: The Herodotus File*, thanks to a co-venture between MTV: Music Television and Pocket Books. Chung, aided by writers Mark Mars and Eric Singer, have forged a large-sized trade paperback published in

The star of her own MTV weekly series moves to the printed page.

dossier form. Structured as a top secret, sealed file, it tells its story in a narrative built of newspaper articles, advertisements, depositions, interoffice memos, wiretap transcripts, blueprints, photographs, and film clips. This technique matches the paranoid beauty of the tale, rife with bizarre weapons, convoluted conspiracies, and grotesque characters. If Philip K. Dick had ever lived to produce a comic book, this would have been it.



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Chairman Goodchild
Here is my department's catalogue of viable Mexican Agents as requested by your office. 245 people perished in the compiling of this report. I myself have been caustically wounded, also my poor penmanship. Choose carefully, loyalty is a fragile commodity in these irrevocable days.
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NEW ON VIDEO

Judge Dredd: Following up on the success of *Tank Girl*, yet another cult comic book hero from the United Kingdom is transformed into flesh and blood. Sylvester Stallone stars as the one man judge, jury, and executioner bringing order to a gritty tomorrow.

Hackers: The Information Superhighway isn't all it's cracked up to be — for the stars of this thriller, it means murder. Framed, they must race the cyberhighway to prove their innocence. Starring Lorraine Bracco, Fisher Stevens, and Angeline Jolie.

Virtuosity: From the director of *The Lawnmower Man* comes a cyberworld

adventure. Denzel Washington stars as an imprisoned ex-cop who must hunt down a computer-generated murderer in exchange for his freedom. Also featuring Russell Crowe and Kelly Lynch.

Dead Weekend: One of the ubiquitous Baldwin brothers, this time Stephen, stars as a police lieutenant who falls under the seductive power of a dangerous female alien whom he has been commissioned to destroy. From the producer of *sex, lies & videotape*.

Strange Days: By New Year's Eve 1999, it will be possible to plug in and relive another's experiences. But not everyone will survive. Featuring Ralph (Schindler's List) Fiennes, Angela (Waiting to Exhale) Bassett,



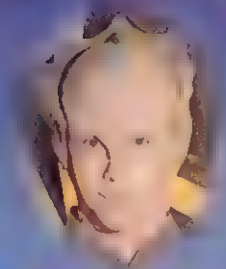
and Juliette (Natural Born Killers) Lewis.

The Invaders: The 1960s cult television show starring Roy Thinnes returns to bring its paranoia to the '90s. *Quantum Leap*'s Scott Bakula stars as the latest earthling to realize that there's something out there.

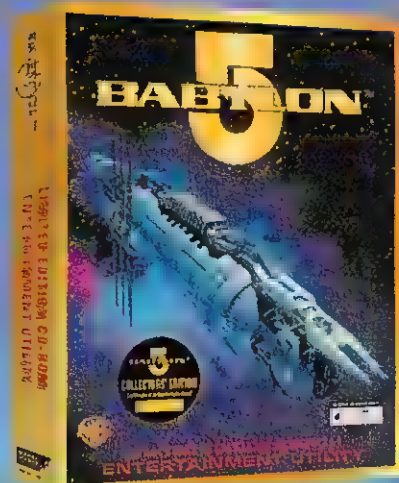
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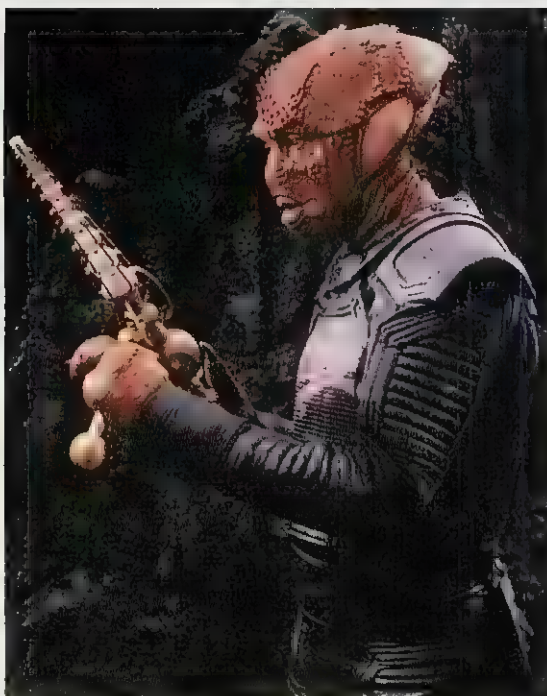


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Experience the thirteen best science fiction films you've never seen.

Barry Longyear's *Enemy Mine* (at right) and Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (below) were both made from classic works of fiction.



INSTEAD OF WRITING YET ANOTHER ARTICLE ABOUT the thirteen best science fiction films we've all seen (you know, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Star Wars*, *Alien*, etc.), I thought it'd be a lot more interesting to take the road less traveled and examine some SF films that are less well-known, often undeservedly so.

A quick disclaimer: Please pardon the hyperbole of the article title. If you're an SF film buff, you've almost certainly seen some of the films listed. But I'm hoping I listed a few you haven't seen, as well.

The task of choosing which thirteen films was made more difficult by the old definitions debate: What makes a film science fiction, as opposed to fantasy or horror? Often movies blur the line between these genres. Are the *Alien* movies SF, horror, or both? And even when you settle on a workable definition of SF, where do you draw the line? I've included a few movies that certainly stress the definition to its breaking point, but I hope you'll give them a try anyway. The penultimate difficulty is in the inclusion of cult movies like *THX-1138*. Such movies might not make standard "10 Best" lists, and yet many SF fans have seen and enjoyed them. Finally, how do you choose the *best* thirteen movies out there?

First and foremost I wanted to find films that currently are available for video rental (Chris

Marker's superb *La Jetee*, the short film that inspired *12 Monkeys*, lost out here — while it can be seen at conventions and in university film courses, it's not easily found for rental). I've gone ahead and included a cult film or two because I think they're particularly worth mentioning. Lastly, I've made judgment calls about drawing the line between science fiction, horror, fantasy, and even mainstream.

So here they are, in no particular order: thirteen SF films that will amuse, delight, and challenge. They should all be seen more often than they are.

Quatermass 2 (1957, British, 84 minutes, black-and-white), also known as *Enemy From Space* is the second of four Hammer Studios movies about the heroic scientist Bernard Quatermass. The third entry in the series, 1968's *Quatermass and the Pit* (a.k.a. *Five Million Years to Earth*) is perhaps the best known in the United States, and is very much worth seeing for its stunning finale. This film has strong echoes of both *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* and *Village of the Damned*, as the indefatigable Dr. Quatermass (Brian Donlevy in a no-nonsense performance) discovers that aliens are not only taking over human bodies, but have actually established an industrial/military colony in what was once a British hamlet. Tension and paranoia escalate as Quatermass's attempts to expose the alien threat are thwarted again and again. Director and co-screenwriter (with Nigel Kneale) Val Guest keeps the plot (and the monsters) bubbling until the creepy, spectacular climax.

Seconds (1966, 106 minutes, black-and-white) is director John Frankenheimer's most blatantly science fictional film (check out *Seven Days in May* and *The Manchurian Candidate*, as well), and yet it still passes as a mainstream examination of identity and the cult of youth. John Randolph plays an aging, unhappy New York banker who signs up with a secretive organization to undergo a series of surgical procedures, emerging as a younger man (Rock Hudson, in one of his best performances). After feigning death, he travels to California to become an artist. Troubles arise when he has difficulty adjusting to his new life, and asks the organization for yet another identity, leading to the genuinely disturbing finale. Watch for Will Geer's unsettling supporting performance and James Wong Howe's striking, surrealistic cinematography.

Fahrenheit 451 (1967, 111 minutes, color), director Francois Truffaut's only English-language film, is an adaptation of Ray Bradbury's well-known novel. Oskar Werner plays the futuristic fireman who starts fires in order to burn books. He also succumbs to the lure of the forbidden, and

Continued on page 96



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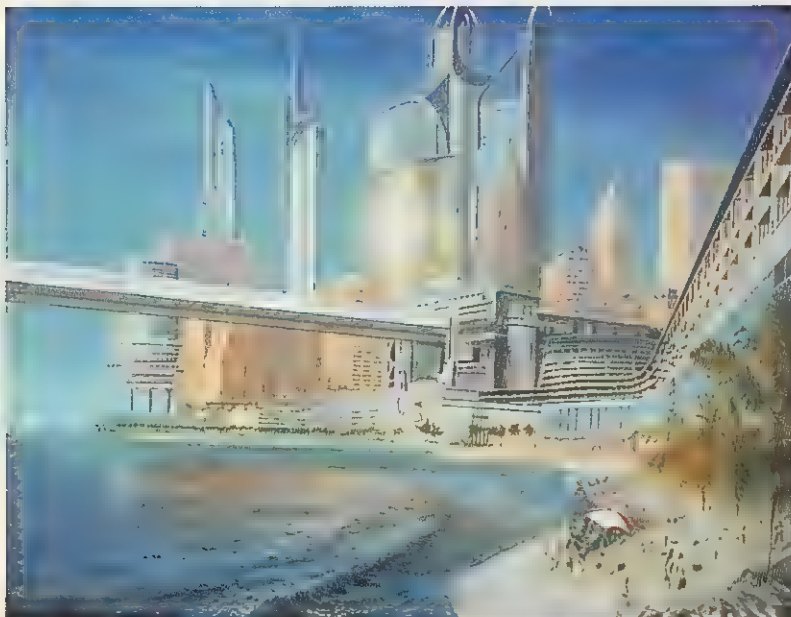
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Is the threat of global warming politics as usual or a true environmental menace?



Once the polar ice caps melt, our inner cities may become beachfront property. Greenhouse Manhattan by Don Dixon.

AS OUR FORUM PARTICIPANTS GATHERED TO discuss the controversial topic of global warming, the editor's home had only just been shoveled out from under thirty-eight inches of snow left from the blizzard of '96. Though the storm system was touted as one of the worst of the century, follow-up articles in major news weeklies still proclaimed that we are in the midst of a dangerous global warming trend. To clarify this apparent contradiction, we met online to contemplate the issue from a more scientific viewpoint. As you will see, the conversation became quite ... heated.

Dr. Arlan Andrews, Sr. recently retired from Sandia National Laboratories and is a founder and vice president of MuSE Technologies, Inc., which markets MuSE, the leading-edge synthetic environment software system. During his tenure in the White House Science Office (in 1992-'93), he reviewed many reports of climactic change, and often disagreed with them. He now lives in Albuquerque, New Mexico, a 6,000 feet elevation, and is not concerned with rising ocean levels. Geoffrey A. Landis works for the Ohio Aerospace Institute at the NASA Lewis Research Center. He has worked for eighteen years on research in improving the efficiency of solar cells, which could be one approach to solving the problem of burning fossil fuels. Landis has won a Hugo Award for "A Walk in the Sun" and a Nebula Award for "Ripples in the Dirac Sea."

ANDREWS: "Climate is what you expect," someone once said, "but weather is what you get!"

LANDIS: The greenhouse effect itself is rather simple. The sun heats the Earth directly, since the atmosphere is rather transparent to sunlight. The Earth cools off by radiating infrared radiation back to the cold of space. But,

since some gasses — like carbon dioxide — are opaque to infrared radiation, these gasses in the atmosphere act like a "blanket," keeping the Earth warm the same way a blanket keeps you warm, by holding in heat. The effect, of course, has been known for a long time. But it was only realized that this was a major effect in the temperature of a planet when space probes began to explore Venus, and discovered that it is far hotter than anybody had any expectation it would be.

ANDREWS: It is ironic that the pollution of modern civilization may be one of the factors that can counteract global warming, by putting particulate matter into the atmosphere. A science fiction novel based on this is *Fallen Angels*, by Jerry Pournelle, Larry Niven, and Michael Flynn.

LANDIS: Yes, as Arlan notes, particulate matter in the atmosphere can also have a significant effect on temperature. It can either raise or lower temperature, depending on how much it absorbs, and how much it reflects, sunlight and infrared.

ANDREWS: The controversy for the last few decades is whether or not human activity *is* causing, *has* caused, or *may* cause such greenhouse warming.

LANDIS: Right. We know that the greenhouse effect has a major effect on *other* planets — Venus, Saturn's moon Titan. How does it affect Earth? And how much effect do *we* have on the greenhouse effect? Turns out that, for the Earth, it's quite complicated! One reason that the greenhouse effect is so complicated is that carbon dioxide — which is the stuff we're putting into the atmosphere every time we burn fossil fuels — isn't the major greenhouse gas in the Earth's atmosphere. Water vapor is. And the amount of water vapor in the atmosphere is very sensitive to the temperature of the ocean surfaces — but also, the more water vapor in the atmosphere, the more clouds, and clouds reflect sunlight back into space — and *lower* the temperature! So it's very complicated to model out all the effects on the temperature. But we do know that humans have been putting carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, lots of it, since the industrial revolution.

ANDREWS: Again, what has bothered me is not the study of atmospheric phenomena, nor speculations on the implications of results, but rather the "Chicken Little" syndrome that seems to crop up among the "usual suspects." For example, Carl Sagan regularly discovers some new species-threatening problem, and the usual solution is to change the Western way of life, repeal capitalism, endanger individual liberties, and centralize government authority — with the philosopher-kings such as himself in charge.

LANDIS: Well, as a Mars scientist, I have to say that I have a lot of respect for Carl Sagan, actually. He did some really ground-breaking work on understanding the climate of Mars and Venus, which lead to much of our present understanding of the greenhouse effect.

ANDREWS: As long as he sticks to Mars and SF, so do I. But he made a fool of himself on the Nuclear Winter

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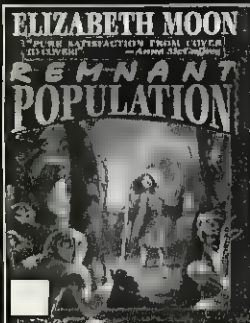
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fiasco. The way such pseudo-scientific speculations were put into law was a farce.

LANDIS: The way *what* scientific speculations were put into law?

SF AGE: By what scientific evidence have people gotten the basis for fears? What measurements cause the speculation of this possibility?

LANDIS: Humans put about 26 billion tons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere each year, primarily from burning coal. Over most of the last century, carbon dioxide concentration in the atmosphere has been measured at the top of a mountain in Hawaii, far from the sources of anthropogenic CO2. These measurements show that the amount of CO2 in the atmosphere has increased by about 30 percent since pre-industrial times. Measurements of CO2 frozen into glaciers tend to confirm that number. That's a lot of carbon dioxide!

ANDREWS: But there is not necessarily a correlation between CO2 and other atmospheric phenomena.

LANDIS: Well, as a matter of fact, there is a correlation. During the ice ages, the concentration of CO2 in the atmosphere was markedly lower than it is now.

ANDREWS: In fact, plants like the increase. I would guess that there have been periodic fluctuations of CO2 over many ages, and we could correlate those measurements with worldwide temperature averages. Has this been done?

LANDIS: But the question is: Is it cause and effect?

ANDREWS: I for one would vote *against* ice ages and *for* the relatively pleasant weather we now enjoy. If it can be shown that more CO2 makes it warmer, then I'll burn more wood in my fireplace.

LANDIS: But it is perhaps disturbing to note that the CO2 in the atmosphere is now higher than it has been since the end of the Pliocene Era, over 125,000 years ago.

ANDREWS: There is an overall philosophical point to be made amongst all the numbers. That is, do we keep studying and refining our measurements and models, or do we rush into making politically correct "solutions" that may turn out worse than the problem we imagined? No one contests scientific studies; some of us do object to "political science," which forces ordinary (Western) citizens to pay for the fixes.

LANDIS: Well, not all of the solutions are in fact "politically correct"! For example, one possible solution to the problem of greenhouse warming might be to increase the use of nuclear power.

ANDREWS: Geoff, I totally agree. But the kinds of people who are most hysterical about greenhouse gases and ozone depletion are the same ones who are violently opposed to nuclear power.

SF AGE: Could someone please touch on temperature measurements before getting into the controversial aspects of the issue? CO2 was mentioned, but not the direct temperature measurements.

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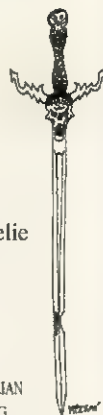
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LANDIS: Well, greenhouse warming is a long-term effect. I've seen graphs of average temperature, and, yes, you might be able to say that it's going up, in fact, by about one degree Fahrenheit over the course of this century, which matches the expected temperature rise due to the carbon dioxide added to the atmosphere by burning fossil fuels. But temperature varies a lot from year to year. It's well known that climate is chaotic. Every time there's a warm summer, it seems that you hear people say "greenhouse effect"! But the greenhouse effect isn't something you see in one summer, or even in a decade. It's a long-term trend.

ANDREWS: Within historical times, there have been wildly fluctuating weather changes. The so-called "Little Ice Age" in the 1600s and 1700s, for example, saw glacial advances and great changes. Some scientists feel that these long-term changes are the result of sunspot variations, solar irradiation variations, and the like, so that man-made (anthropogenic) changes may not amount to much. Also, many of the models of anthropogenic climate change are suspect.

LANDIS: There are many different computer models, but they tend to predict a change of something like 1 degree (Celsius) over the next twenty to thirty years (assuming exponential growth in fossil fuel use continues). That might result in roughly half a foot of ocean rise by, say, 2030. So I think we can safely say that one warm summer doesn't mean that the ice caps are melting! Or even two or three.

ANDREWS: Many of the models fail to account properly for natural emissions that may modify the global warming. For example, Mount Pinatubo's eruption in 1991 spewed all kinds of garbage into the air, and even cooled down the whole world for a while. Such events are seldom calculated.

LANDIS: Right; cooling due to sulfate aerosols. This shows up as a "bump" on the temperature graph; the global warming is a long-term rise on top of that.

ANDREWS: There is a growing consensus among science types that the world is warming. Maybe we would like to vote as a species on whether we'd like the change? Siberia might like warmer winters; sub-Saharan Africa might like some rain. And who needs Florida anyway?

LANDIS: Or the islands of Micronesia.

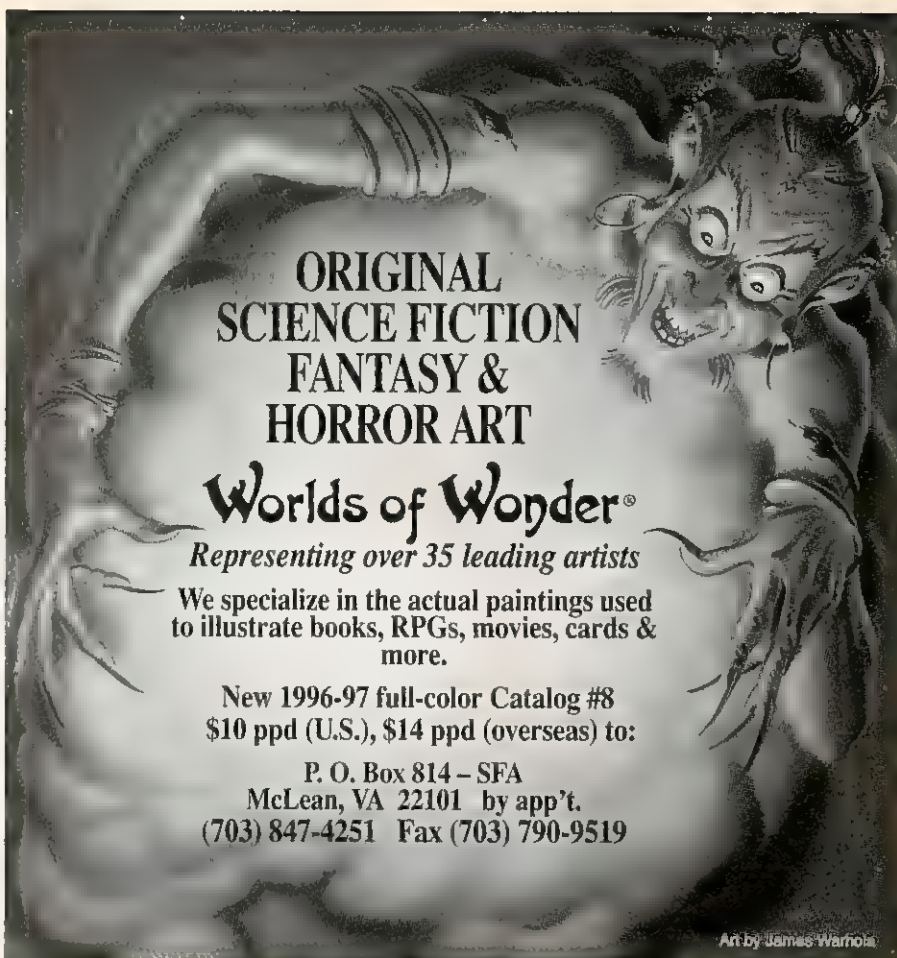
ANDREWS: We might gain land mass in Antarctica!

LANDIS: And Canada and Russia will become major agricultural giants.

ANDREWS: Seriously, why do the powers that be insist upon maintaining the status quo regarding the climate? Assuming that things get warmer, we might stave off an ice age that definitely would endanger much human life and progress.

LANDIS: Well, satire is one thing. But I don't think that anybody is seriously proposing that an ice age is imminent.

SF AGE: What action should we take



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regarding global warming? What is the general consensus of the scientific community?

LANDIS: I would say that the scientific community has some disagreements, but everybody does agree that carbon dioxide emissions will cause global warming if they continue to increase at the rate they have been. It's a controversial question how much warming will happen how fast.

ANDREWS: And along comes a volcano, or a variation of solar radiation, and all bets are off.

LANDIS: Quite true, Arlan. But greenhouse warming is a trend *on top* of natural effects.

ANDREWS: The best solution they are able to recommend is a "carbon tax," to discourage burning coal and fossil fuels. This would hit poor countries hardest, but it would allow the Yuppie mentalities of Western states' opinion leaders to feel good about "sacrifice" for the common good — as they jet from continent to continent, expending energy freely.

LANDIS: The point of such a "carbon tax" would be to make the people who most contribute to the greenhouse effect — that is, those who burn the most fossil fuel — pay some of the cost for their actions.

SF AGE: So is this situation something to merely be watched with disinterest as a scientific curiosity? Or must we act in some way?

LANDIS: If it's true, we will eventually have to act. But it would be wise to learn as much as we can before acting.

ANDREWS: *Eventually* is the key word, Geoff, and I commend you for it.

LANDIS: Oh, it's definitely truth. The real question is, how fast are changes occurring? Or, phrased the other way, how long do we have before we have a crisis?

SF AGE: What degree of temperature change or ice cap melt must occur before we decide that it is more truth than theory? How much evidence is needed?

ANDREWS: What is needed is a comprehensive global climactic model that corresponds to reality, that can be checked, and that changes according to actual measurements. Then and only then can science truly know what is happening. Everything before then is speculation; that is fine for the journals, but when the fate of nations' economies depends upon correct results, one must postpone precipitate actions. Besides, in the true spirit of science fiction, why isn't someone (engineers, not scientists), looking at a physical fix? Such as spewing up particulate matter of a proper type so as to influence the warming.

LANDIS: Meanwhile, at the moment we still have a choice of paths. Which choice shall we make?

SF AGE: Lay out those paths for us, please.

LANDIS: Nuclear power? Solar power? Space power systems? A return to the agrarian past? Fusion? Move off of Earth altogether? Actually, Arlan, many people have looked at the idea of a technological fix to

greenhouse warming.

ANDREWS: The concentration of particles to reflect given amounts of solar energy are calculable. It might be cheaper and better for the human race to lug up gigatons of matter than to have the whole planet become a tropical bog, mightn't it?

LANDIS: The difficulty is that the Earth's surface area is big, and so any fix becomes a major engineering task! Martyn Fogg discusses several of them in his *Terraforming* book. To reduce heating by two degrees, for example, would require putting one to ten million tons of aerosols into the stratosphere. That's a huge amount of mass to inject ten miles up, and if you think that people are uncertain about the effects of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, that's nothing compared to trying to predict the effects of ten million tons of sulphur aerosols! The point is, it's a lot easier to prevent the problem in the first place than to try to patch up the effects later.

ANDREWS: Hey, to us engineers, nothing's too big. Just give us the money, and go away. Seriously, there should be contingency plans just in case there is a threat. Perhaps other kinds of solutions are available should we look for them. My complaint is that the proposed solutions are always central government, more taxes, less freedom, more abortion, and a return to poverty for the Western world. Surely something else is possible?

LANDIS: I don't think that the solutions to the greenhouse warming need be so awful. The point is, we as a species need to take the effects of our actions into account. We need to be responsible for our emissions.

ANDREWS: Over historical times, there have been great variations in the weather. My grandfather tells about the severe winters and harsh summers in rural Arkansas in the early 1900s — rivers frozen solid enough to drive wagons over, trees splitting from the cold. As a kid I longed for those times. *Our winters* were sloshy and not much fun. And that was just over a forty-year period.

LANDIS: Yes, climate is chaotic.

ANDREWS: No — weather is.

LANDIS: It's not the short-term variation that's the problem — it's the long-term trend.

ANDREWS: My serious point is: What do we do about it?

Controlling emissions through taxation and regulation seems awfully passive. Why not confront it head-on, if it turns out to be a problem? Calculate the problem, the cost, and tell everyone. On the other hand, we cannot keep the Earth in the present condition, no matter how we try. We cannot possibly preserve all species, nor keep the temperature or the ozone levels the same.

LANDIS: I think that the solution will have to be not lower technology, but *higher* technology.

SF AGE: So do we just watch and wait? Since changes in the environment are a long-term process, is it possible that by the time we realize a threat is imminent, it will be too late to act? Sort of like having to

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steer an ocean liner early?

ANDREWS: Define, measure, refine, speculate. Anything else will be wrong at this time.

LANDIS: There is a problem.

ANDREWS: We think there may be a problem. All in favor of warmer North Dakota, raise your hand (above the water level).

LANDIS: Global effects take a long time to occur, and the reverse side is, they will take a long time to reverse. Eventually, we are going to have to stop using coal as a fuel source, unless we want to return to a carbon dioxide atmosphere. But what do we replace it with?

ANDREWS: In fact, there is some evidence that glacial changes can occur in a matter of years, not centuries. Geoff—if we plant more plants, increase oceanic algae, for example, can't we ameliorate the effects? They take in CO₂, and defecate oxygen. That kind of biological approach should be amenable to computer modeling.

LANDIS: Yes. That's one solution, to reforest the areas we've deforested.

ANDREWS: That's my point. Let's define the problem as we see it, keep on studying it, refine the models, and look for reasonable solutions.

LANDIS: Since trees both create and absorb CO₂, it's only a partial solution.

ANDREWS: There may be chemical solutions (pun intended)—or we can wait for the universal solution, nanotech, to save us all.

LANDIS: Right now is probably the time to learn. But we should keep in mind that, sooner or later, it will become the time to act, and we should think very carefully about what action we want to take.

To sum up, I think that it is important to learn as much as we can, and that we start learning now, before the process of environmental change has gone too far. Part of this learning process will come from observing other planets and moons—Mars, Titan, Venus—since the more we understand how the feedback cycles of climate work in the atmospheres of other planets, the more we will be able to understand our own climate. And much of the learning process will come from studying our own planet, from the ground and from space, to understand what changes in the environment we have caused. I'm afraid that I'm very much saddened by the current political mood, which is that scientific research into the environment should be cut. But I hope that, despite short-term cuts that are made by politicians made for temporary advantage, we will continue to learn about the environment of the Earth and other planets, and eventually have a good understanding of the complex interactions of the climate and biosphere of the planet we live on.

ANDREWS: Conclusions: Maybe mankind is warming up the planet, maybe not. If so, maybe it's better, maybe not. Maybe we should do something, maybe not. Maybe we can do something? I'm for proactive solutions—utilize brainpower, high tech, and capitalism. If not, we learn to swim. □

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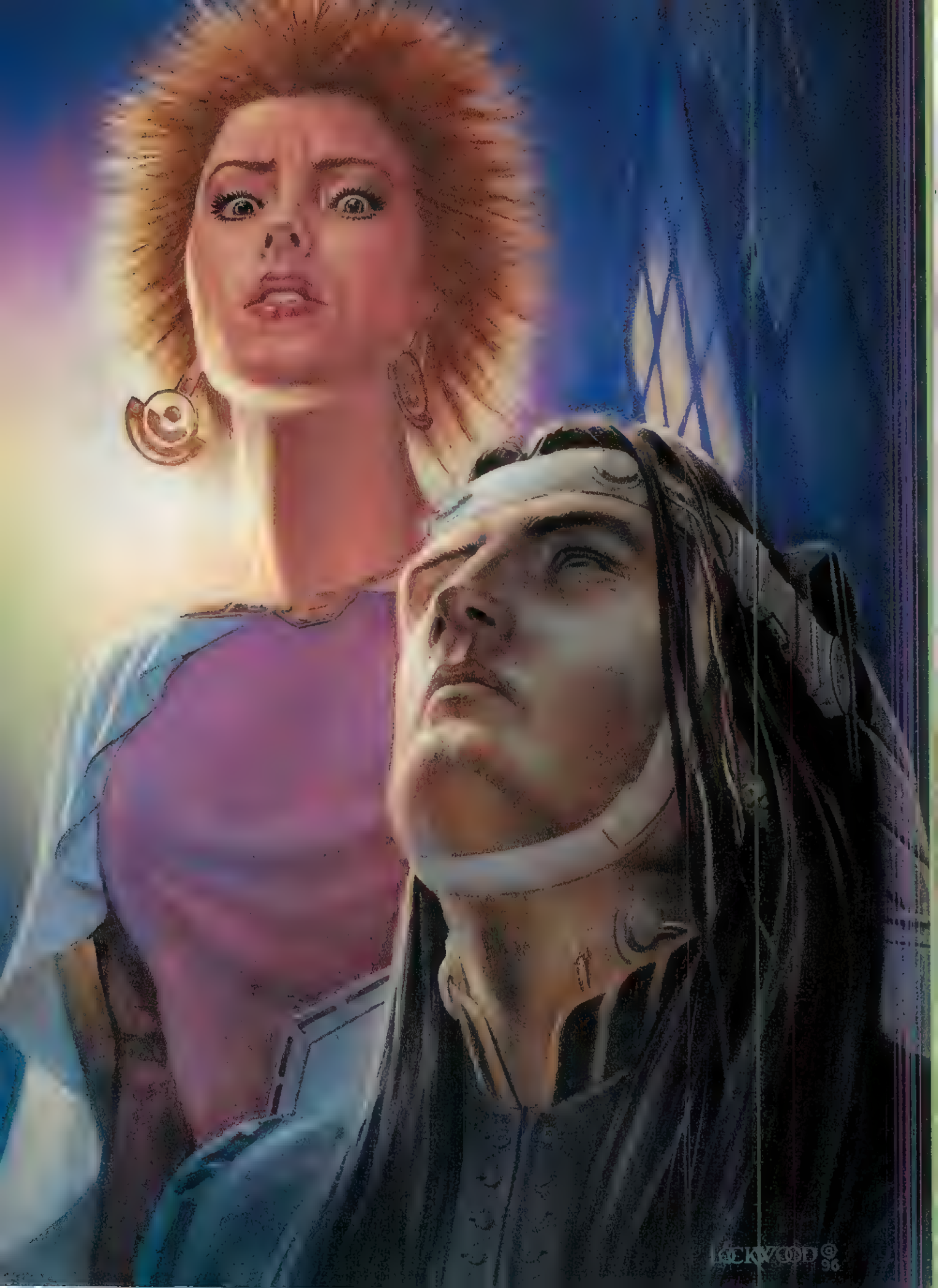
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THE COMPASSIONATE SMOTHERING- DEATH OF THE UNIVERSE

The Galactic Coalition is composed of 49 planets with over 600 billion inhabitants. Only Interrogator Regal Ket could protect them from the Haliens.

BY KANDIS ELLIOT

Illustration by Todd Lockwood

T

HERE WAS AN INVALID-CHAIR, A caretaker grasping its handles, and somewhere amid the belts, supports, straps and bands, behind tiny indicators, adjustment controls, and glowing monitor lights, between padding, blankets, and cold alloy, was a man. Or what had been a man, now an unresponsive blob of cytoplasm, within which fired the neural synapses that continued to deny a soul the dignity of final death.

Interrogator Regal Ket searched for a hint of awareness as she peered down into the quadriplegic envoy's eyes. They were surprisingly clear, like wet amber, with black-mirror pupils a little too dilated for the orbiting station's corridor lighting. Occluded at metronomic intervals by slow blinks, their unfocused stare was devoid of expression.

The interrogator knew she could not really be smelling urine, an ill-washed mouth's decaying breath, the stink of worthlessness kept alive by a transport chair. Whatever the chair did to keep its occupant breathing no longer required functional guts. Actually, neither the chair nor the paralysis disgusted Regal Ket as much as the passivity. Haliens were peace-mongering, love-preaching fools, and *that* disgusted Interrogator Ket, for, unlike the simple blow to the skull which would relieve the helpless envoy's suffering at once, the paralysis of docility could not be cured. No matter how hard the blow.

The interrogator proficiently masked her personal feelings and formally addressed the creature in the chair. "Welcome aboard Council Station, Ambassador. The Coalition extends wishes for a comfortable stay." The envoy did not react. Did he seem familiar? The suspicion annoyed her; it was Ket's job to never forget a face. Or a mind.

"Thank you." The envoy's caretaker acknowledged her with a nod and a smile. "Fa Hali also sends greetings. I am Samel."

Regal Ket examined the other Halian. He, too, had the amber-yellow eyes and black hair typical of the race. Also typical was his benign, fatuous expression, reflecting a nature that had been described ad nauseum in field reports by the equally simpering word *nice*. The interrogator forced distrust from her eyes. Fanatic war dogs were both predictable and controllable; self-righteous pacificators were neither.

"Can he respond at all?" she asked.

"He hasn't yet. We assume he can hear and see, though."

"I fail to understand, Deputy Ambassador Samel. If the ambassador cannot communicate, how will he take part in the tribunal hearings?"

"Please, just 'Samel'." The caretaker smiled again. Already Regal Ket loathed that smile. "It shouldn't be any problem. I'll act as interpreter."

"He communicates with you?"

"I — " Samel shrugged, "know what he's feeling."

This time the interrogator's eyes did narrow. So, it is caretaker Samel with whom we shall actually be dealing. All right. But why bring this revolting cadaver then? "Samel, do the Haliens understand the nature of these hearings? Are you fully aware of what's at stake?"

"Oh sure. Aren't we?" Samel asked of the man in the chair. His tawny fingers absently nudged the invalid's hair back from the headband. "Interplanetary war, hostilities with offensive weapons, genocide — all sorts of unpleasanties, isn't that it?"

Regal Ket briefly contemplated the imaginative, sadistic tricks inflicted by Coalition civilizations upon each other. They seemed doubly amazing, to be so blithely described in Samel's flip, innocent, *benign* voice.

"May we be shown to our quarters now?" asked the caretaker. "The ambassador is weary after our long shuttle trip."

Ket wondered what could possibly have made the envoy weary. Or how Samel perceived it. "I'll take you there myself." She wanted an opportunity to throw her empathic curtain around the Haliens to catch an initial sensing. It was essential for the Coalition interrogator to detect what lay beneath the outer layers of hypocrisy, lies, and deceit that coated envoys like the concentric tissues of a corm. Since Haliens were still relatively unknown quantities, she reached out cautiously.... From Samel, an easily sensed, mild glow of excitement. From the ambassador ... nothing.

How could she read a dead mind?

The caretaker inspected the designated quarters inquisitively, steering the chair so the envoy could ostensibly also inspect. The cripple did nothing to manipulate his hovering vehicle. His slack hands and feet lay unmoving against padded rests and he had no eye- or mouth-control device. In fact, a strap extended under his chin from the headband to keep the jaws shut. Regal Ket considered that the chair's features epitomized the Haliens themselves, an incongruous mixture of technological genius and archaic ethical slag.

"Do you require assistance with the ambassador?" Ket asked.

"We'll be OK, thank you," Samel replied. "You are welcome to stay while I put the ambassador to bed. I will be glad to answer questions about him."

"The ambassador would not object?"

"No, I don't think so."

Interrogator Ket watched a complicated unbuckling and disconnecting as the caretaker prepared the envoy's exit from his chair. Ket had wondered if the creature ever left it.

Samel lifted the body; arms, legs, head, hung as limply as the long black hair. "When you're an envoy you expect scrutiny. And questions. Very few people are familiar with Haliens."

Indeed, thought Regal Ket.

Placed face-up on the bed, the envoy still wore his headband, chestband, and a wide abdominal belt that appeared solidly bolted into the pelvic blades. Ket frankly examined the otherwise nude form. During her preparation for the hearings, she had studied innumerable holoeidits of Haliens; this one seemed a thin, but typical specimen. Samel uncrimped the limbs and arranged them in more natural positions. Noting this action, Ket asked, "Does the ambassador perceive bodily sensations?"

"No, we spare him that. It'd be too painful, sitting in one position for so long. I move him, of course, but not as much as we move ourselves, unconsciously, when we sit or stand or lay. I would be most comfortable if I laid on the bed this way, and so I arrange him."

"You are quite compassionate, Samel," said the interrogator. Ket noted the quick, peculiar glance Samel sent her at the remark. "And what are the purposes of these bands on him?"

"They guard essential functions when he's out of the chair. The headband monitors cranial nerve functions — that his irises are responding appropriately to the changes in light intensity, saliva is produced and swallowed in the normal reflex, the eyes blink, all those little, but essential things. The chestband guards heart and breathing. The abdominal strap monitors dialysis, liver function, absorption — automatically injected water and nutriment maintain homeostasis." The caretaker folded his hands and stared down at the lax face. The envoy's eyes remained open between slow blinks. Samel sighed. "I've often wanted to give him a taste of the wonderful foods I've enjoyed on this trip, but I was afraid he might choke. And anyhow the excretion systems have been bypassed. The belt recycles metabolic wastes. All three bands are coordinated by the back plate." He rolled the body to expose a metal oval embedded between the shoulder blades.

"I'm impressed with the technology." Regal Ket did not bother asking why they kept the body alive. It was either a matter of some misguided morality, in which case it would serve no purpose to discuss it, or it was to make a public display of their alleged brotherly love. Another ploy to lull Coalition members into believing that Haliens were indeed a harmless race. If that was their game, it would be wasted on Interrogator Regal Ket.

Without warning she grasped the invalid's near arm. Lax, limp, muscleless as cultured food fungus. Truly paralytic, then. A conscious being would not have been able to resist an involuntary flinch. A false, drug-induced paralysis could not so waste the tissues. What was left, however, emanated a hint of viability. "The ambassador has retained some tone," the interrogator noted.

"The bands stimulate intermittent muscular contraction. He won't degenerate any further. But oh, you should have seen him before. He was very handsome."

"He has not been like this for long, then?"

"It is six cycles now."

Six cycles. Ket felt a memory jarring loose. Six cycles ago was — "What is the ambassador's affliction?" she ventured cautiously.

"We don't have a word for it." The caretaker looked sadly down upon the victim of unrequited death. "Your physicians called it opton burn."

"Opton — " Interrogator Ket carefully examined the pale tan face herself, mentally adding the flesh and muscle tone of a whole man. The face now became vaguely recognizable. "The ambassador is Captain Tomisan Caitley!"

"Didn't you know?"

"But — *why*?"

The caretaker studied Regal Ket. "What better judge of your good will than the one among us you murdered?" Then: the compassionate, friendly, *threatening* smile.

Regal Ket watched the caretaker fuss over his charge for a few more moments before she silently turned to leave. She glanced back as she exited; Samel was sitting beside the body, embracing it. All during the episode she had felt nothing but congenial anticipation from the one living Halian mind.

"WHY HADN'T THEY JUST LET THE POOR bastard die, for godssake?"

"The question is, how have they managed to keep him alive? No one else has done it."

"More new Halian technology?"

"That's not it, none of us ever made much attempt, is all. Why keep the cripples? Can't regenerate from brain burn, you know."

Pre-hearing exchanges in the envoys' lounge — nervous, superfluous, but Coalition Interrogator Regal Ket listened attentively nonetheless. They'd all been introduced, if one could call it that, to the new Halian envoy, ex-Captain Tomisan Caitley. No one could discern any reaction in Ambassador Caitley toward his new career, but he'd certainly made an impact on his forty-nine fellow tribunal

delegates. As each spoke, the interrogator let her empathic tendrils rake the deep, unguardable muckholes of their minds. She never touched the superficial chaff, their here-and-gone petty desires and angers and flickering conscious subvocalizing. Ket dredged instead the unconscious wellsprings of their thoughts. It was endlessly surprising, how deaf they were to the wise and cautious whispering beneath the surface fool.

"Anything can be regenerated. Eyes, limbs, organs —"

"That's not it with opton burn. Sure, his body's all there. But *he's* not in it anymore. Cognitive integration is what's burned. Forever."

To Regal Ket, the envoys, for the most part, were fundamentally nameless and faceless, possessing beneath their surfaces only eccentric bits of fluff separating this one from that. On the other hand, she granted special interest, thus names, to two of the lounge occupants. The Earth envoy, John Edwards — typical tongue-twister Earther name — was sponsoring the Halian admission attempt. Earth had earned a modicum of trust before the Tomisan Caitley incident; they were the only race still allowed on-planet by the Halians, therefore the sole suppliers of information about it. Earth had to tread an unenviable line between sponsor, and collaborator. John Edwards sat uncomfortably in a too-soft chair, slowly twirled a glass of refreshment he did not want to drink, and spent a lot of mental energy trying not to look at ToxTox dal'Tox, the envoy from Roo-Seven, who was also Ket's other object of interest. That chlorophyllous sun-lover had even more reason to sweat. Roo-Seven's hearing would come first. Theirs wasn't a really surprising crime, but the idiots had been caught with red blood on their green hands — and the Halians had cut the hands off.

"SO HE'S STILL ALIVE. THE POINT IS WHAT the hell is he here for?" asked one of the Faceless.

The gathered emissaries of Coalition

worlds looked to the Earther for explanation. "Perhaps," Ambassador Edwards finally suggested, "the Halians wish to see our reaction toward a completely helpless entity. They value compassion, they wish to learn our aptitude for it before they join the Coalition. He's a test."

An envoy from a world jealous of Earth's sponsorship snorted a vulgarity. "He's a slap in our face! Now if we request, for example, explanations for their hoarding technological secrets, they will point to their 'ambassador' and say, 'Before we reveal our military capacity, you must convince us this will never happen again,' and they'll milk that silly excuse forever. Or if we demand an explanation for their destruction of Roo-Seven's vessel, they will again trot out the 'ambassador' and say, 'We were only protecting ourselves from what you did here.'"

Another nodded at the reasoning. "Well, if that's their trick, it won't work for long. They can't get that much mileage out of an unfortunate misunderstanding. After all, hundreds of Coalition members were killed outright when the Roo-Seven vessel was destroyed."

"They don't consider it a misunderstanding," Regal Ket interjected. "The Halians consider it murder."

"What nonsense," mumbled the envoy who thought the chairbound man was a slap in the face.

"So what?" Roo-Seven's ToxTox dal'Tox finally found his voice. "Murders are committed by the thousands every second in this Coalition. Why make such a case out of this one?" The envoy mopped his face and glowered with unmaskable repudiation at the interrogator.

"Evidently it was the Halians' first experience with such a crime," Ket replied. "Your warship commander made quite an impact on them." That self-aggrandizing idiot had been welcomed aboard a Halian diplomatic orbiter and then pulled the trigger on the orbiter's captain: Tomisan Caitley.

"They hadn't many second thoughts when they obliterated our fully manned vessel," the besieged envoy grumbled. The loss was minor; the humiliation was not.

"They learned fast." Regal Ket enjoyed seeing the cold Roo-Seven eyes flick toward her emotionless face, flick away. He hated her. Roo-Seven was definitely slated for stern punishment for the present debacle, which the opening of a new world had become. Under normal circumstances, the Halians would have been simply admitted to the Coalition and their resources thence divided up amongst all the members equally, according to law and tradition (laws and traditions that would have been spooned out to the Halians in slow, less obvious doses). One hungry member must not be allowed to help himself first from the platter. Of course, neither can the platter be allowed to remove itself from the banquet hall — although that's exactly what happened when Roo-Seven so masterfully taught the Halians two quick, disastrous lessons: Coalition members kill and can be killed; by Halians.

Whether or not the Halians were too dangerous to be allowed existence would also be decided at the tribunal. That decision awaited Regal Ket's final analysis of the newcomers. Since the interrogator's unique mind could see truth beneath deception in the minds of fool and genius, envoy and emperor, her omnipotent presence hung like a stone gargoyle over every pivotal Coalition affair. Her suggestions became law, her opinions belief, her accusing finger execution. It was impossible not to hate her. Some might have sought out favorable treatment by befriending her. Except all knew that friendship from the interrogator was also impossible.

John Edwards of Earth rose and began to pace. "We must keep in mind that we are dealing with a new race whose political outlook is a naive conception of good and evil. You may be reading more subterfuge in their motivations than they are capable of. Perhaps they brought Caitley as their ambassador simply because his opinion of us *would* have meaning for them."

"Forgiveness, then?" suggested another cynically.

"That's a big part of their nature. Halians may have simple principles, but they adhere to them."

Someone asked, "Have you met Ambassador Caitley yet? He's a damned vegetable. How in hell is he going to indicate this almighty forgiveness?"

Regal Ket focused carefully upon the squirming Earther. Waves of doubt. A *surf* of uncertainty. How could professional diplomats not pick up such transparency? Then: a barely detectable undertow of *dread* from the hidden mind of John Edwards. The interrogator frowned.

"Among themselves, the Halians are — er, empathic," the Earther replied, quickly adding, "They must be in actual *physical* contact to perceive one another's emotional state, of course. You've all read our reports on the importance of embracing in Halian culture —" His gray eyes looked askance at the interrogator. (By all means, thought Ket, avoid even the *insinuation* of telepathy. Dangerous subject.) "I believe," Edwards continued, "that the ambassador's caretaker is indeed able to sense his general impressions. Certainly strong ones such as condemnation or acceptance."

"Such rot," commented an envoy whose love of intoxicants should have disqualified her from the hearings. "At any rate, we're not dealing with the cripple. The caretaker is obviously the real ambassador, and he's the one we have to pump to learn exactly how this is going to disrupt the military status quo. We know they've got an interstellar technology, evidently a damned good one. We know they've got defenses capable of withstanding heavy tau bombardment. What we haven't learned is the nature of their offensive weapons. Why the hell aren't we getting any *real* information from those studies on the Roo-Seven wreckage?"

Wisps of panic began to waft from the envoy whose vessel had been destroyed, and Interrogator Ket returned her focus to ToxTox dal'Tox. This man's homeworld had just cut its own green throat trying to forcibly steal those unknown Halian offensive weapons. What secrets of Roo-Seven's *own* had been dashed by such recklessness? The theft of a larger basking rock in cleaner sunlight? Regal Ket would look into that, but now she drew back to a more curious puzzle. What had caused the Earth envoy's uneasiness of a moment ago? Earthers were the most familiar with Halian culture and it certainly

hadn't alarmed them; they were strongly advocative of the new race. Yet John Edwards had truly believed that caretaker Samel could communicate with the living dead, and that thought had frightened him ... The interrogator rose and left the gathering.

All eyes surreptitiously watched her go.

REGAL KET DIDN'T LIKE SMILES, WAS immediately suspicious of them, had never experienced a sincere one in any of its forms among Coalition humanoids.

A smile was a defense reaction, a smoke screen, an obscene gesture. To accept one as a simple expression of happiness was exceedingly difficult.

But she had to, for Ket could pick up no ulterior motives for Samel's repetitive smiling. The caretaker's present smile was for the ambassador, whom he was dressing. Arms of seemingly boneless rubber were being threaded into shirt sleeves. Samel had touched small inputs on the back plate, and Caitley's neck and torso muscles had immediately gone rigid, enabling the brain-emptied envoy to sit upright on the edge of the bed while vestments were layered on. Shirt, trousers, weskit, finally a tastefully embroidered jacket. Caitley was smartly dressed for the inquisition of his slayer.

"We don't wear a lot of clothing," Samel explained, "but we try to follow your customs while we're guests. Here we go, Tomisan." The ambassador was lifted into his chair and strapped, buckled, plugged in. Samel touched more controls; the torso muscles relaxed and the body sagged against its fastenings. While the caretaker pushed useless feet into soft slippers, Interrogator Ket extended a hand to the still-rigid head. The skin was covered with a fine velour that appeared smooth, but felt furlike to the touch. She studiously examined the large, glassy eyes. The headband stimulation wasn't one hundred percent compensative. The pupils were still too dilated for the ambient light. Dilation indicated certain sorts of brain disorders, she remembered, death being the extreme. But Ket knew that no physical damage existed behind those emptied eyes. All the synapses, capillaries, neurons were still intact, or at least again so after treatment corrected the physical carnage. But where the thinking soul, the *person*, went after receiving an opton charge, no one had ever determined. As though the victim himself lay on a different plane, just over the dimensional edge, of where his cytoplasm resided.

Our ear, Ket mused, at once turns the head toward a footstep in the silent room; as will our eye fix to a sudden bird in the empty sky. The head is tethered by our senses. What pulls the mind, the spirit? What leash was severed here?

Ket tried to raise Caitley's face to look in the eyes directly, but the still-convulsed neck muscles held the head surprisingly immobile. No wonder the musculature had not grossly degenerated. Samel strapped the jaw, halted the neck muscle stimulation — the head dropped onto the chest — and brushed the glossy, uncut hair into a neat straight mane around the shoulders before fastening the head upright again.

All this time the interrogator sensed nothing from Ambassador Tomisan Caitley, neither hatred nor desperation nor anger nor despair. Nothing. On a different plane, in the wrong dimension. She focused on the caretaker.

"Samel, do the Haliens understand what happened to Captain Caitley?" Slight confusion at the question: Samel was as easily readable as any humanoid.

"Do you mean other than his being shot with that weapon?"

"Yes. Can you understand that Caitley merely got in the way of what you might call a struggle for survival?"

The Halian searched her for further explanation, found nothing. He slowly sat down on the bed and pulled the transport chair forward until the envoy's knees met his. "We have heard many explanations, Interrogator Ket. What *happened* was the murderer demanded that Captain Caitley reveal our orbiter's offensive weapons systems, and when Tomisan didn't, he was shot. As an example, I've

been told. To intimidate the crew. Of course, they overpowered the murderer as soon as —" Samel leaned forward to smooth the envoy's jacket where it was crimped by seat straps. "Too late"

A wave of sorrow staggered the interrogator. She reduced the intensity of her focus.

The caretaker added bitterly, "I don't see how it was a struggle for survival for anyone but Haliens."

"A balance of power is just that, Samel," Ket explained. "A balance, easily tipped by the threat — from you in this case — of potential new, superior power. What have you got? Will you share? As you must, if you become a Coalition member. Harmony depends on all possessing equal weaponry. Can you understand that concept?" Balance of fear, balance of insanity. Regal Ket sent out another tendril ... the Halian did not understand.

"Why don't you just all get rid of your weapons, then?" he said morosely.

"Would you get rid of yours?" Child's question, child's reply.

For the second time since his arrival the caretaker gave her a sharp, peculiar glance which Regal Ket could not decipher. He turned to Caitley with an amused and, it seemed to Ket, conspiring smile.

When Samuel continued to look attentively at the ambassador, Ket intensified her probe for any hint of life in that erstwhile mind ... nothing. She peered at the cripple's eyes while a slow blink came and went, the eyes merely aimed by coincidence at the caretaker sitting opposite him. "Are you receiving communication from the ambassador?" Ket asked.

"It isn't like that," Samel replied, rubbing his forehead. "There's no telepathy. I know you're thinking that; they all did, the Earthers. It scared them for some reason. But there's no exchange of thoughts. It's more like, well —" Samel leaned forward to embrace Caitley. Their heads appressed, voice muffled in the invalid's hair. "Feelings. We *feel* that he's still there." After a moment he straightened to eye her speculatively. "Maybe a very strong, truly telepathic empath —" (such as me, obviously, Ket thought sarcastically), "— could enter his mind and find him in there. Maybe even ... pull him back into being, as it were This —" a gesture at the chair — "doesn't mean he's not there, *inside*. Can't uproot a mind, except for —"

Except for death and opton fire, Regal Ket supplied.

"But you asked about communicating. We Haliens all think alike. Interrogator Ket. I mean, whatever I would feel about a situation, Tomisan here would probably hold the same views about it. You see? I know what he's feeling, 'cause that's what *I'd* be feeling. You Coalitioners can't seem to understand that."

"If that's the case, Samel, only *you* needed to come for the tribunal hearings. I fail to see the logic in bringing Ambassador Caitley."

"For you, Interrogator Ket," responded the caretaker quickly. "He's the only one who will make *you* convince the Coalition members to accept Haliens on our own terms."

"Indeed," murmured Ket. *What the hell!* She turned to the still body in the chair and searched for something threatening about it.

"IT WASN'T MURDER! MURDER IS *PERSONAL*! THE SHOOTING OF CAPTAIN Caitley was totally *impersonal*! He just happened to be there, is all. If you consider this —" Roo-Seven envoy ToxTox dal'Tox shot a verdant digit at the chair's contents, "— to be murder, then we must consider your destruction of our vessel and her entire crew *also* murder!"

Interrogator Ket stared at the live-dead man in the chair and allowed the confrontation to boil on. Encircling the arena of the Council floor in tiers of elaborate personal bench-booths, tribunal delegates had gotten three days' worth of entertainment out of both the formal and informal proceedings; it was now time to bring matters to a head. This had to be settled before debating the primary subject of Halian membership. Ket was more absorbed by the fact that Samel actually believed something lived in that opton-charred mind, and beyond that, was being instructed by that hidden quantity. A quantity that toyed with her, challenged her. Welcome, then! Worthy challenges for Regal Ket were exceedingly rare. She brought her attention back to the Council floor. The protesting envoy, gesticulating from the spotlighted defendant's box, was trying to develop some

defense for his homeworld's actions. Exchanging accusations with the Haliens was not strengthening his position.

Samel stood unbudging behind the cripple's chair, making whomever spoke to him also appear to address Ambassador Caitley. Caitley, in the center of the Chamber floor, slow-blinked at a vacancy several feet beyond his knees with the attentiveness of a stone.

The caretaker was replying. "Since we must use your word 'murder' for what you have inflicted on one of our people, we must also use your word 'suicide' for the destruction of your vessel."

"You fired on them! Obliterated them!" cried the accused world's envoy, astonished by the new accusation.

"Correction," responded the Halian. "They fired on *us*. And that was *all* that occurred." ToxTox stood mute, gulping air. Samel turned to Ket. "Interrogator, Ambassador Caitley has been authorized to explain to your Council that the tau weapon fire was turned by our orbiter's protective shields, exactly and as automatically as any space debris or radiation would be turned. As your reflection is returned by the mirror. In this case, back to the source."

"You are testifying that the attacking vessel was hit by its own reflected weapons fire?" said Regal Ket calmly. Nobody was sure *what* had detonated the cruiser. The nearest Coalition observer had recorded no detectable retaliatory energy emanating from the Halian orbiter. The analyzed wreckage was confirmed destroyed by tau disruption of some sort, a peculiar tau waveform. A reversed one.

"Our entire world is now so protected, Interrogator. Ambassador Caitley invites the Coalition to test our assertion by firing upon us a second time." The caretaker glanced at the Roo-Seven man. "The ambassador earnestly advises you to take our word, however."

Hopefully, Coalition military would not commit so stupid a diplomatic *faux pas* as sending out even a drone to fire upon the Halian world. Samuel's mind held a clear vision of the consequences. Regal Ket needed no confirming evidence to know that the Halian testimony was the truth, and she let ToxTox *dal*Tox see her belief. He was crumbling — silently, but the interrogator perceived it. "Shall I advise the Council to delegate to your *personal* transport vessel the honor of such a test?"

Surrender burst from the man's mind. "No, interrogator."

"Very well. We shall accept the Haliens' explanation for the destruction of the attacking vessel. We must then settle the question of why the Halian orbiter was attacked in the first place. Has this been explained to you, Samel?"

"The Roo-Seven vessel requested permission from Captain Caitley's crew to send research transports to the surface. When permission was refused —" Samel shrugged, "they opened fire."

The other envoy, desperate, broke in. "Why did you refuse such a simple request? What are you hiding down there?"

"A simple —!" The caretaker's jaw dropped. "Your murderer had just shot Captain Caitley! The attacker and his entourage had just been expelled — he must've just arrived back at your ship — when you made such a request!" Incredulous, Samel turned to Regal Ket. "Isn't it obvious to you why we refused, Interrogator Ket?"

"It is to me, Samel. Why is it not to you, Ambassador ToxTox *dal*Tox?"

The Roo-Seven envoy cursed and turned from the Council chamber's scrutiny.

Samel continued. "What isn't obvious is the reason for the request in the *first* place. You *knew* we'd refuse."

Regal Ket spelled it out for him. "Samel, they deliberately goaded you into refusing any request from them. Convince me, ToxTox," she turned to the other envoy, "that the entire episode was not a pitifully flimsy excuse to provoke and test the Haliens' military capacity?"

"We performed a valuable information-gathering mission," came the defeated reply, "in the service of the Coalition."

"And perhaps to incidentally also claim the right to attempt conquest for yourselves?"

"Why give first rights to Earth? They're almost as bad as the damned Haliens when it comes to moralizing about the right of conquest!" Hatred usually reserved for Regal Ket was suddenly aimed at John Edwards. The color of the Earth's face revealed that the

Roo-Seven man had scored a direct hit. The salvo was returned, with augmentation.

Interrogator Ket needed no more sensing of either party. "I find Coalition Member World Roo-Seven guilty of unprovoked hostilities against Earth-Affiliate Newworld Fa Hali. Your actions shall be regarded as a renegade claim to attempt conquest, and as such shall earn you the same reward as any legitimate attempt which had similarly failed. I recommend that Council consider dismembership procedures for Roo-Seven as soon as the Halian matter is decided."

The air left the sentenced world's envoy. "No," he managed to whisper, sinking into his chair, growing chlorotic as his chloroplast-laden blood drained from his face.

Caretaker Samel stared amazed at the crumpled figure. Ket could not feel the Halian's reaction; she had immediately closed against all emotional discharge as she sentenced ToxTox. No need to subject oneself to unnecessary abuse.

"Why," the caretaker hesitantly asked the Roo-Seven diplomat, "did you risk all those people on that ship? We gave you no cause to fear that we might have more, or better, of these weapons you people value so highly. Or that we would actually use such against you. Why?"

Though Samel spoke, it was the body in the chair that drew Regal Ket's attention. No cause to fear. Yet she remembered clearly her probe of the Earth ambassador for his innermost sensation regarding the Haliens. John Edwards' instinctive heart had fluttered with anxious misgiving. Why?

THE DOOMED ENVOY'S SHOUT SEEMED A reply to her silent musing. "You just heard why!" ToxTox whirled bitterly to face the Halian behind the chair. "You

see how close we all are to destruction? The Coalition will make an example of us to keep you in line. If it wasn't this incident, they would find some other excuse. They're hungry! You'll soon find yourselves taking risks to grab even the potential of new weapons to protect yourselves." He stabbed a digit toward the interrogator. "That thing! She's not our fair and just mediator. She's our jailer! Our demon!" The envoy's hatred slammed toward Regal Ket; she mentally shrugged it off. The Roo-Seven man's head sank into his hands. "I hope to hell you really do have something, Haliens. I hope to hell you use it!"

An inexplicable wave of compassion wormed its way past the Interrogator's shield. She looked around wonderingly for the source. The caretaker.

His hands raised toward her. "We would prefer retribution in the form of work toward reconciliation. Casting offenders out of your Coalition seems a loss for all."

Ket coldly examined the Halian. "Allow me to clarify, Samel. No member may wantonly aggress against another, or its affiliates. Any world so doing begs dismembership — which is global radiation with opton pulses until all sentient consciousness is destroyed, after which the planet is given over for colonization by other member worlds." Interrogator Ket had to struggle to close against the caretaker's bombardment of dismay. Earth should be reprimanded for withholding basic information about Coalition bylaws and procedures, she thought. "I'll explain this but once, Samel. We are forty-nine planets with a population of six hundred billion. Diplomacy now regulates what resources remain. Any world may claim the right to try to conquer any other, if they feel certain of success. Of course, weaker cultures are always protected by one or more sponsors. In a coalition of worlds each powerful enough to destroy all the others ten thousand times over, it is absolutely *essential* that aggression such as Roo-Seven's against you, which could precipitate a genocidal holocaust the dimensions of which you cannot begin to imagine, be met with the ultimate castigation. War must be kept *civilized*."

The caretaker's horror lasted another silent moment, then abruptly vanished. Interrogator Ket probed; only a dim anger was perceptible. *So they can hide from me*, she thought. "Are we now to assume, Ambassador Caitley," Ket asked the lump in the chair, "your philos-

ophy is going to forbid Halian membership in this Coalition?"

"On the contrary," replied the caretaker. "We insist."

LOUNGE BANTER RANG FAST AND HEATED.

Regal Ket watched them. A few days hence, they would vote on the Halian admission attempt; meanwhile the

Coalition diplomats would try to feel out each other's votes. She, of course, already knew how they'd vote, the nameless and faceless dross, even those still working up the courage to cast either one ballot or another. They baited and cajoled each other now, as they did in every afterhours social gathering in the Station's too-opulent lounge atrium.

"I know why they're insisting. If we give them full membership, we are obligated to divulge all our technological information to them. Armament, defenses, ship engines, planar warps, everything. They'll know exactly what we've got. How could we hide anything?"

"They'll interview every member society. We couldn't possibly keep a single secret," lamented an envoy from a society scorned for cowardice.

"And what assurance do we have that what they share with us is everything they got? The Earthers took that planet apart and what did they find?"

"What *did* they find, Ambassador Edwards?" Another envoy turned to the Earther, who hovered by the buffet.

"You received the reports." The Earther glared over his shoulder. "The *complete* reports."

"That cripple's underling was outraged, he was *sick* at the Roo-Seven sentencing! He can't possibly grasp the complexity of inter-world trade balances, population adjustments, politics, *anything*! They've just climbed down from the trees, for godssake. How are we going to deal with a member who's a simple-minded *primitive*?"

"There's the question," whined the coward. "Why does the primitive want membership in our 'evil' ranks?"

"It's obvious to me," interrupted Regal Ket. "Our Halians consider themselves messiahs. Come to cast out evil and make the Coalition of Worlds as gentle and loving and —" she sneered contemptuously — "*nice* as themselves. They're planning to conquer us."

"That's absurd!" barked John Edwards, turning from the buffet with a polite sampling of snacks he did not want to eat. Earthers were a study in annoying displacement behaviors. "They want membership for the same reason any intelligent, inquiring beings would when encountering other such beings. Do you think they're the bloody imperialists *we* all were? I've spent six cycles with them; theirs is the most pleasant, healthy, *peaceful* society I've ever encountered. They're humanitarians, they're scientists, they're —" The Earth envoy's defense of his protégés turned abruptly to stony discomfiture. The Interrogator was probing so deeply, she wouldn't have been surprised had his subconscious felt it.

"They're what? Say it, Ambassador of Earth."

John Edwards collected more courage than Regal Ket had given him credit for. "They're *nice* people!" he exclaimed, exasperated, feeling the idiot as he said it.

Regal Ket moved forward silently, her psychic tentacles stretching before her, testing, grasping. Edwards blinked rapidly but stood his ground. "You Earthers know something about them that you have not shared with your fellow ambassadors here," she accused.

"We have shared everything! We have invited the Coalition to analyze all our data. We haven't deciphered any more Halian technological riddles than —"

"Other than technology." Ket probed, saw a faint outline of a wasted invalid strapped in a chair. "The Halians themselves. You —" Deeply, ripping the secret from him. "*Love* them!" And a shadow of ... *fear* them.

Interrogator Regal Ket abruptly withdrew her probes. At the instant she had opened the Earther's mind she had seen a quick flash of that

same fear within herself. A reflection, surely. The interrogator did not know fear.

The probing had inexplicably fortified the envoy whose people had discovered, and liked being sole sponsors of, impenetrable aliens. "Let it be known then," he declared, "Earth has established diplomatic rapport with the Halians and have found them a worthy race. We shall vote for admission without restraints."

A brave speech. And the undercurrent of fear waxed briefly once again. The interrogator had sensed enough. The Earther possessed a foreboding he himself did not yet consciously feel. Though he testified otherwise, something deep within him had been threatened nonetheless. Interesting, thought Regal Ket. Earthers may have latent interrogator ability themselves. Perhaps she would give their envoy a small test.

"Ambassador Edwards," she said, "do you have any guess why the Halians sent an uncommunicative, helpless quadriplegic as their envoy?"

There it was! A sharp snapping pulse from far below the man's consciousness: He suspected the chairbound creature was *not* uncommunicative or helpless. *Tomisan Caitley was in there, someplace. Waiting. Lurking. Hunting, perhaps? For what prey?*

John Edwards responded carefully. "I believed the caretaker when he said he could feel Caitley's opinions. They are empathies. They're natural interrogators, Regal Ket, with one major difference. No Halian will condemn another the way you have condemned Roo-Seven's entire race. And on that fact alone, Earth welcomes them as friends."

SO, EARTH WOULD VOTE FOR HALIAN MEMBERSHIP ON THE FIRST ROUND. We shall see, Interrogator Ket sneered in her thoughts. John Edwards believed his cheeky declaration because he had not yet detected his own uncertainty the way she had. None of the Coalition envoys would be able to detect it the way she had. Thus, since the Earthers themselves could not judge their own misgivings, it would be futile for an interrogator to try and draw it out of them during the hearings. She would have to expose it at the source. Finally, excitement! Life was so jading these days; confessions such as Roo-Seven's were too easy. The interrogator slowly stalked the corridor to the Halian quarters, planning.

They had to attempt conquest of some form, she mused, for it was inconceivable that they would adjust to or even condone Coalition society as it existed. They might try the segregationist route, unacceptable because the Coalition could not allow a potentially dangerous unknown to just sit doing unseen things. But no, Samel already insisted they would choose membership — doubtlessly to infiltrate the Coalition and convert it to what they considered the 'right' kind of existence. And at present there was no good reason for Regal Ket to discommend membership. Whether through fear of the Halians' unknown power, attraction to their 'benevolent' society, or hunger for their resource-rich, sparsely populated planet, the Council would without doubt grant them membership, and quickly.

They probably couldn't conquer *without* membership or they wouldn't want it so bad. Why couldn't they? What was the nature of their weapons systems? Logically, Ket thought, they could not be vastly superior to Coalition weapons, which had been refined by experienced militaries for centuries. Perhaps Halian weapons were actually inferior. If so, Halians would be relatively easy to get rid of.

Yes. That's how to do it. Yes. Ket would make a strong case for Halian inferiority. Or they *would have retaliated* after the Tomisan Caitley incident. Earthers won't buy it, the converts, but the rest of the members could be convinced. Only Halian *defenses* are the novel things here. Done with mirrors, they said. It'd be tricky firing against whatever it is they have. *But we could make our own mirrors, bounce reversed energy right back.* It may take a while to crack their defenses. But Halian weapons probably aren't —

Probably don't exist! Of course! For what reason would a non-belligerent race, which up until thirteen cycles ago believed themselves alone in the galaxy, develop any kind of *offensive* weapon?

Ket had them now. She will have members voting any way she

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FARTHEST HORIZONS

AT TEN MILLION MILES AN hour, *Orpheus* fell out of infinity toward the enigma.

Looking for Leah, I found Tally in the electronics shop. Her face was covered with a green plastic light shield, and she had an omniblaster taken apart on the workbench. She prodded at its guts with an oscilloscope probe. I was fascinated; I'd never seen a blaster taken apart before. I didn't even know you

BY GEOFFREY A. LANDIS
Illustration by Janet Aulisio



could take one apart — I'd always thought that they came in one piece.

"What'cha doing, Tal?"

She didn't look up. "Stand out of the beam path, please."

I thought I was out of it, but I stepped backward a pace anyway.

"What does it look like I'm doing, Tinkerman? I'm tuning up this blaster, that's what. Shade your eyes."

I shut my eyes, but then opened them just a slit so I could see what she was doing. She poked something inside, and a thin bright stream of purple-pink light sprayed out of the nozzle. I squeezed my eyes

tight, and watched the afterimage of the flash fade from a deep sea green to a faint swatch of darkness.

A moment later she grunted. "You can open your eyes now."

I opened them cautiously. Green dazzle still flashed across my visual field. "I didn't know that omniblasters went out of tune."

"Shows how much you know." She prodded farther into the disassembled gun.

Looking at it carefully, I could pick out what must be the main crystal. It looked like a chunk of dark glass wrapped up in cottony-white insulation, with cryo lines sticking out at odd angles.



"They don't," she said, looking sideways at the oscilloscope trace while making an infinitesimal adjustment with a plastic screwdriver. "The factory tunes them, and you're not supposed to mess with it. But I don't like depending on a weapon that I haven't personally checked tuning and focus on. Do you? That last little difference between factory-tuned and hand-tuned could be the critical shot that'll save my ass. Yours, too, white boy. Close your eyes again, please."

I squeezed them tightly shut this time, and the flash barely leaked in past my eyelids.

Tally grunted again. "Better. So what brings you down here, any-

way? You hotshot scientists suddenly decide it's time to rub shoulders with us hoi polloi?"

I looked around. Hotshot scientist? She couldn't mean me; I was a pretty good technician and not too bad as a backup pilot, but no kind of scientist.

"Or maybe you dumped that honky bitch and decided to go looking for a real woman?" She looked up and grinned, white teeth gleaming against beer-bottle dark skin. She was good looking, sexy as a tiger in her own compact and well-muscled way, but not for me.

"Not a chance, Tally."

She shook her head. "Don't I know it. Well, it's your life. Any time you wanna change your ways, I'm not hard to find, kid. I'll make you forget her in a hurry."

I nodded my head and smiled. "I know you too well, Tally. Why, I bet when you make it with a guy, you wear three blasters and fourteen pounds of grenades, just in case some misdirected army tries to take you out while you're distracted."

"Maybe I do." She laughed. "Any time you want to find out, kid, I keep my cubie door unlocked. But open the door *real slow*, right? Don't want to make a mistake and perforate your skinny white ass. Shield your eyes, please."

I complied, and the darkness behind my eyelids flashed pink-white for a moment.

"OK, it's done."

I opened my eyes, and watched her put the omniblaster together.

"Want me to do yours?"

"Mine? I haven't even checked one out of the weapons locker. Why, do you think I'm going to need one, out here ten billion kilometers from nowhere?"

"Who knows? Better safe than sorry, that's what I figure. But, really, what brings you down here, Tinkerman? You looking for me?"

I wasn't, actually, but was too polite to say so. "We just got in range for the long-focus cameras. I thought you might want to see?"

"Oh, yeah? Damn right I do. Why didn't you say so right away?" She lifted her jumper and dropped the just-tuned blaster into a holster skin-taped under her left breast. In the brief flash of skin, I saw another holstered blaster and sheathes for two knives. For Tally, paranoia was a way of life. She caught me looking. "You like what you see, white boy? I might give out free samples if you ask nice."

"Maybe later." We both knew that later would never come, but the banter was a game Tally enjoyed playing. We'd played it for years, ever since Leah and I had first met Tally Okumba. She'd been the bodyguard for an expedition to the ruins of old Los Angeles. Hardly anything lived in OLA any more, but the things that did were tough, fast, and clever. And hungry. None of them, however, proved to be as tough, fast, or clever as Tally. Not by half.

THE FUNNY THING WAS THAT LEAH and Tally had liked each other instantly. Leah Hamakawa respected competence in any field, and Tally found Leah's intelligence infinitely amusing. They got along so well that most of the time I felt like I was in the way. But it was certain that Tally's passes at me would never go further than words, even though Leah occasionally hinted that she would have no objections if I did decide to find another romantic interest.

As if I could.

WE FOUND LEAH, OF COURSE, ALREADY IN THE SCIENCE BRIEFING room, with Sailor sitting on her shoulder. Sailor T. Bird was a dingy-yellow cockatiel with a ruff of pink feathers behind his ears and a

salacious vocabulary. Over long voyages, one of the amusements of the crew was teaching him new phrases. He cocked his head to look at us when we came in, but he didn't say anything. Leah nodded toward the screen. "Just look at it," she whispered.

On the screen, the long-range photograph of the enigma was projected, looking like a lumpy, faceted ball made of spare parts from an armadillo.

"The scale of the photograph is deceptive," the head astrophysicist said. "The object is nearly a quarter of a light-second across."

I whistled softly. The thing was *big*, capital B big. Sitting next to it, the Earth would look like a pea next to a grapefruit. A lumpy, mutated grapefruit.

Sailor cocked his head at my whistle — whistling was his favorite game — and said, "Hey, sailor, wanna show a girl a good time?" Tally reached out to scratch him behind the neck feathers, and he bent his head forward and chirruped softly.

"So why wasn't it discovered from Earth?" somebody asked.

"Too dark. The picture we're looking at was taken with reflected starlight, brightened by a factor of ten million with image enhancers. You'd never be able to see it from Earth, not even with the orbital telescopes. Too dim."

"Any ideas as to what it is?"

"One thing for sure," Tally said, still scratching Sailor with one hand. "It's an artifact, all right."

"Impossible!" said Leah. "Look at the size of it. It couldn't possibly be artificial. Not something that big."

Tally shook her head. "It's big and it's artificial. And one more thing. Dangerous." She smiled. "Deadly."

THE ENIGMA HAD BEEN DISCOVERED by gravity. Starprobes crossing the great dark a light-week past Pluto were being nudged off course. Barely enough to warrant a mid-course correction, but consistently enough for the trajectory computers back home to notice. They figured it

for the gravitational pull of a sub jovian, a frozen planet wandering a lonely path far from any sun. They calculated where the object had to be, and sent a ship — *Odysseus* — with a crew of three to investigate.

The day before *Odysseus* was to have made contact, the lasercast status reports fell silent. Two weeks later the carrier wave and telemetry resumed, but no reports. Groundside tracked *Odysseus* as it came into the system, and intercepted it well outside the orbit of Jupiter. The on-board computer memories were blank; all the science logs, erased. Of the three explorers, only one returned. He was insane.

Now it was our turn.

Orpheus was a high-thrust research ship, seven times as big as *Odysseus*, twice as fast, with three fusion engines capable of five gees for as long as the crew could stand it. We were armed to the superstructure, bristling with sensors from microwave to gamma telescopes, and staffed with a crew of scientists, technicians, pilots, psychologists, and a survival specialist, ready for anything.

Or so we hoped.

ORPHEUS DECELERATED AT A GEE AND A HALF. OVERGEE MAKES ME feel clumsy, stupid, and perpetually tired, like the last stage of drunkenness, when you've lost the veneer of happiness and are left feeling weak and slightly sick. In overgee you have to watch your actions, think out each motion as precisely and carefully as a drunkard's.

Sex in overgee is no advertisement for spaceflight — but it beats no sex at all. The trick is, you have to go slow. Now if I could convince Leah ...

It was free time, off shift. She was lying on her side on our shared bunk, the curves of her shoulder and hips casually seductive even under the shapeless jumpsuit. I sat down on the bunk and, taking infinite care, started to gently knead her shoulders.

"What do you think it is?" she said.

"Uh, a backrub?"

"No!" She laughed. "The ... enigma. You think it's an artifact, too?"

"What do you think?" I moved down her back, feeling her spine like a string of carved wooden beads, felt the enigma of her shoulderblades, the perfection of her ribs.

"I don't think it's artificial." She shook her head, lazily, and rolled over onto her stomach. Her eyes were half-closed, misty in thought. I straddled her, weight on my knees, and continued rubbing. "Something funny," she said, speaking mostly to the pillow. "No radar reflection. Not millimeter band, not microwave, none. We should be close enough to get *some* signal. And another thing. We're taking photos all the way in, trying to synthesize a 3-D composite, but it isn't working. It's as if no two photos are of the same thing, like it's changing shape every time we take another picture."

I carefully stretched myself down on the bunk beside her, reached around, and slid down her zipper with one hand while continuing to caress her back with the other. "Tell me more," I said softly and slid the jumpsuit off her shoulder. The enigma I was interested in was closer at hand, and had a name, but was no less mysterious to me for that. As mysterious as my own emotions, unpredictable but impossible to ignore.

"I don't think we're seeing it at all," she said. "What we see isn't what's really there. It's hiding from us, Tinkerman."

I kissed her shoulder.

"It's nothing we've ever seen before. It's an enigma, all right. But I'll find it out. I'll strip it bare, and steal its secrets."

Leah Hamakawa had attracted me and fascinated me since the day I first saw her. As for her — I don't know. Often it seemed that she tolerated me with an offhand amusement, like she might tolerate a stray puppy that followed her home and cried pitifully on her porch. I wasn't her intellectual equal, not by half. I could be her pilot and her handyman: nothing she couldn't do herself if she put her mind to it, but someone convenient to have around.

I'd been following her, loving her, for so long I no longer even remembered why, or if what I followed was her, or just some image of my own dreams.

Someday, I fear, she would wander off, attracted by some mystery to be explained or scientific anomaly to be investigated, and barely even notice my absence; perhaps, at best, missing me in some vague way.

But not yet. In our shared cabin, in that high gravity, thinking out each motion carefully as any drunkard, I laid down beside her and slowly slid between her legs, and forgot about the future, about the past, forgot about everything but the feel, the smell, the texture and softness and warmth of her, until at last I think that even she forgot herself for a little bit, and existed only with me in the here and now.

HALF A TRILLION KILOMETERS FROM HOME. *ORPHEUS* WAS A CLUSTER of twelve identical spheres held in a circle by cobwebs of beryllium-titanium, with a long slender cylinder in the center. Attached to this were the three small space-transfer vehicles for ferrying supplies ship to ship, each an open beryllium-alloy geodetic trusswork, a jungle-gym with small atomic-hydrogen rockets. The somewhat larger surface lander, *Eurydice*, was held in a cradle nestled against the core. Extending from the back of *Orpheus* was a longer truss, clustered with dropaway hydrogen balloon-tanks like fat jellyfish caught in a fishnet. At the farthest end were the bumpy donuts of the three fusion engines. The fusion flames were transparent, but shoved the ship with a firm, invisible hand. The whole thing was irregularly cluttered with telescopes, clusters of antennae, radar dishes, plasma probes, lasers, and other scientific instruments.

We approached the enigma, and the closer we got the stranger it became. It no longer showed on photographs as an object half a light-second across; in fact, it barely showed at all.

Orpheus's fly-by was half a million kilometers closest approach, ten times farther than doomed *Odysseus's* first pass. A year in transit, and the captain wanted to scope out the beast before committing to anything closer.

I joined Tally and Leah in the number-three science pod. Gradient Forward gravitometer, magnetometer, ion density and species, spectroscopy in a hundred bands; Leah's restless attention flicked from instrument to instrument. She watched the instruments with the gaze of a lover, with all the attention she had never given me, seeing a mystery to be unveiled. Tally was just as intense, fixing on one instrument for a long moment, then suddenly shifting to another, watching it as she would keep an eye on an enemy, or an unknown danger to be appraised and conquered.

Neither paid attention to me.

Sailor hopped up to perch on my shoulder, and I idly reached up to scratch him behind his neck feathers.

I looked out. I seemed to be the only one looking directly out the porthole, toward the enigma itself, instead of its digital reflection. In the porthole the enigma was invisible, an empty space in blackness. All around were stars: Gemini, the Pleiades like scattered diamonds, the Hyades like a sprinkling of fairy dust, twinkling romantically.

I blinked. Without an atmosphere, stars do not twinkle. I looked again. Still twinkling.

"Leah? Are we in atmosphere?"

Her eyes barely flicked to the panel. "No."

"You crazy, white boy?" Tally asked. "You know this is no atmosphere ship. Ion density gets high, Captain Shen aims us outta here right quick, count on it."

I kept silent, looking out. The stars were definitely twinkling. It was pretty, but I didn't like it. I looked back toward the enigma.

"Closest pass in ten seconds," said Leah.

And suddenly I saw it, in the very center of the enigmatic black, the one thing that shouldn't, couldn't be there: a planet. Not a subjovian, dark and frozen half a trillion kilometers from the sun, but a world with fluffy white clouds and green continents and blue oceans, inviting and impossible.

"Closest pass, now."

The planet whipped past, shrank to a distant blue pinprick, and vanished.

Even if a frozen, desolate planet were there, it would be invisible in the starlit darkness between the stars, with no sunlight to illuminate it. It could not possibly be visible with the naked eye.

What we're seeing on the instruments may not be what's really there, Leah had said.

"A planet," I said, but nobody was listening. "A planet."

THE FUSION ENGINES STOPPED *Orpheus* ten million kilometers from the enigma, and shut down, waiting. *Orpheus* would drift slowly toward the enigma, but at a distance of half a light-minute the pull was small. It would be days before a noticeable motion would build up.

The enigma stood below us; invisible, yet omnipresent.

The ship was in free fall, and everybody but the duty pilot was in the recreation and auditorium pod for the science conference.

Except for me, and — perhaps — Sailor, no one else had seen the planet. Or, if they had, they were keeping quiet about it. In fact, no two of the instruments had seen the same thing. There was something there, but they couldn't tell what it was. It didn't seem to have a defined surface; didn't reflect radar; didn't respond to radiation probes of any sort, lasers through pulsed x-rays. Two small probes

sent on a closer fly-by returned, in perfect condition, but with blank electronics. The only thing that they agreed on was the gravity: a perfectly symmetrical, perfectly spherical gravitational field, with no spherical harmonics, equatorial bulge, or mascons of any sort. A spectacularly bland field, Leah concluded.

The surprise, though, was from the communications crew. The uplink from Earth was gone. Stranger still, they had detected a reflection of our own transmissions, echoing from empty space. "If you integrate the intensity of the reflected signal," said the comm officer, "allowing for the ship's motion and assuming a Gaussian backscatter cone, the total intensity is very nearly the same as the intensity of the signal beam."

"Which means?"

"Our signal isn't getting home."

The discussion continued, everybody talking at once. "An artifact." "A black hole." "A new type of subjovian." Sailor hopped from shoulder to shoulder, whistling and chattering, quite plainly enjoying the hubbub.

Leah shook her head, and her short dark hair fanned out around her face. In free-fall her body rotated in reverse, a tiny dance. "No. Something — strange."

"In a moment," said Captain Shen, "I will make a decision as to how, or if, to proceed." In an instant the hubbub quieted as the crew turned to listen. He was a short Asian man, with a fringe of white hair around his otherwise bald head, and an identical fringe of beard around his chin, both trimmed to little more than stubble. Inscrutable he was not — he joked and played ZG volleyball with the rest of the crew, and bunked with the second pilot, Dale Ten Eyck — but in matters concerning *Orpheus*, once he made his decision, he would not be swayed.

"This ship is not a democracy," he said. "However, before I make any decisions, I will listen to any opinions or suggestions this group may care to offer. We can start back now. Sooner or later we will clear this echo-sphere ..."

"About a week by my guess, Captain," said the comm officer.

The captain nodded. "Thank you, Mr. Lawson. At that point we will be able to send our data back. This will be a noteworthy achievement, and I think at that point we could declare the main scientific objective of the mission accomplished. Alternatively, we can remain here and try to learn what we can. Opinions?"

"Stay."

"If we go, nobody will believe us. We gotta see this through."

"Stay."

"Make another fly-by, this time close."

"Hell yes, we're nowhere near done."

"Another year, to report nothing? Let's get the job done first."

"Very good," said the captain. "I will take your opinions into account. Dr. Hamakawa? You had something to add?"

Leah nodded. "Yes. We should go back, but not a fly-by. There's something there. I propose we should make a landing."

The captain didn't even blink. "And which piece of data makes you believe that there's a surface we can land on?"

"Individually? None. But together ... yes. Something is distorting our sensors, so there must be *something* there. We know it has gravity; that's one thing it can't disguise. It's a planet-sized object. If it were a black hole, it would be the size of a golf ball, impossible to see. It's not a star. Even a brown dwarf would be visible in the IR from Earth. Something strange. Something very strange. But long odds, way long odds, that it's got a surface. And we won't find out until we go there."

"And the proof, Dr. Hamakawa?"

"Call it gestalt." She shrugged. "Or intuition. If that's not proof, all I can say is, the proof is on the surface."

The captain nodded. "Very well, Dr. Hamakawa. Make me a plan for landing." There was a bustle of noise, and Captain Shen raised a hand for silence. "I haven't made a decision yet. Make me a plan, Dr. Hamakawa. I won't endanger this ship under any possible circumstances, and I won't bring it closer than half a gigameter to the anomaly. Make me a plan that allows for all possibilities, even the ones

that you have dismissed as impossible." He spun on his axis. "I'll be waiting for you at 2200 hours shift-one time. Carry on."

THE TRAJECTORY LEAH PICKED WAS AN UNUSUAL ONE: A CONSTANT-thrust elliptical epicycloid. It was known in theory, but as a pilot, I'd never heard of anyone actually flying such an odd curve before. *Orpheus* would drop the lander, *Eurydice*, into a highly elliptical orbit. As *Eurydice's* orbit approaches periapsis — the lowest point — it ignites its engines and simultaneously begins to rotate at a slow, constant velocity: a ponderous, fiery pinwheel. The rotating thrust vector successively slows the orbital motion, drops *Eurydice* toward the hypothetical surface, then slows and stops the descent. For a moment *Eurydice* hovers, thrust exactly countering gravity. As it continues to slowly rotate it tips slightly, accelerates off to the side, and thrusts back into orbit.

Leah explained the advantage of this maneuver: Once started, it requires no changes in thrust or rotation to complete. As long as the engines themselves work, even if the navigation and guidance electronics failed completely, *Eurydice* still safely returns to orbit.

Eurydice would only hover, not land. Captain Shen would not let Leah risk *Eurydice* on a landing, no matter how brief, and so Leah came up with an alternative plan.

The hover point was calculated as the one-gee gravitational contour. Half the crew volunteered; Leah picked Tally and me for her landing party. We each had one of the three space-transfer vehicles, crammed with equipment, strapped to the outside of *Eurydice*. We were to visually verify that the enigma had a surface — if it *did* have a surface — in the brief moment that *Eurydice* hovered. The decision would have to be made as an on-site judgment. If it looked landable, we would blow our transfer vehicles free of *Eurydice* at the hover point and drop down.

The same maneuver in reverse would be used to pick us up.

"It's crazy," said Tally, shaking her head. "I like it."

"It'll work," said Leah. "The enigma is odd, but we know that the laws of gravity still work."

"Count me in," said Tally. "When do we do it?"

IN TALLY'S SPARTAN QUARTERS IS A STATUE OF THE BUDDHA, HAND-carved out of rosewood. Hers is not the fat, smiling Buddha sold behind the counters of expensive Chinese restaurants, but a slender man with ropy muscles sitting cross-legged, his eyes closed, his long staff resting casually across his lap. I have never heard Tally mention the statue, or even glance toward it, but the small statue has traveled everywhere with her, and if she is in a place where there are flowers to be found, there will always be a single fresh flower set carefully before it. It seems out of place, unless one recalls the traditions of the warrior monks.

I have never asked.

Perhaps, floating alone in her transfer vehicle strapped to *Eurydice*, waiting for the unknowable, she prayed. I know I did. I am sure that Leah did not. *Eurydice's* drive turned on, and slowly built up thrust.

Silence punctuated by concise bursts of radio instructions. Nothing was visible below, not even blackness, but I had a sense that we were suspended motionless and something huge was coming toward us at incredible velocity. I sat in a web seat inside a tiny bubble canopy attached to the open framework of the transfer vehicle, which was itself held to the solid mass of *Eurydice* by polymer straps that didn't look strong enough to hold up a good-sized fish. The transfer vehicles, which had never been designed to be cargo carriers, had been loaded to the limit. Every piece of equipment that any member of the crew had thought we could conceivably need was jammed into one or another of the mesh carriers strapped to every surface of the vehicles, making the ungainly t-vehicles even more lumpy and asymmetrical.

I caught my breath and looked down again, willing my eyes to focus. Something was below me, something that my brain refused to focus on. Concentrate on one tiny part. An edge. Follow the edge, around, to ... a circle? A circle.

Suddenly it popped into focus for me, not just one circle, but

thousands, millions; a surface of perfect, sharp-edged circles. Each circle was tangent to another circle at every point along the circumference, myriad circles so tiny as to be nearly points, others so large that they disappeared into perspective at the mathematically sharp vanishing point, and every size between. No circle overlapped any other. Fractal circles.

It was so clearly defined that it was completely impossible that I could have failed to see it moments before.

Eurydice fell, and rotated as she fell, the plasma of the fusion exhaust drawing a pencil of insubstantial shimmer across the fractal landscape.

And inside the circles I suddenly saw more circles. It resolved into layers of circles, a surface with myriad holes of all sizes, under which was another surface with holes, underneath which ... a carved Chinese ball with a million ivory shells, except that I could now see that the shells were not ivory, but spectroscopically pure shades that shifted as we moved. The circles expanded to swallow us as *Eurydice* dropped toward them. Did the pilot see the same thing? Did Leah?

The surface was in such crystalline sharp focus that it could have been a centimeter away or a thousand kilometers. The laser altimeter and the landing radar both showed nothing but vacuum under me; the outside camera showed only snow. I felt the double jolt as Tally and Leah cut free of *Eurydice* at almost the same instant. We were at the cusp of the cycloid, and for an instant *Eurydice* hovered motionless. Before I could think it over, I hit the release and joined them.

Pyrotechnic charges severed the polymer straps holding my transfer vehicle to *Eurydice* and blew it free. The t-vehicle, which I had never thought to name, started to tumble for an instant. Before I could grab the manual controls, the gyros kicked in. My engine stuttered to life and the autopilot pushed the vehicle away from *Eurydice* and her invisible, deadly, exhaust. *Eurydice* veered over sideways and accelerated away, dwindling into a tiny, ascending speck, and then I was suspended alone over a frightening fractal vastness.

"Separation," I said into my radio, but my words were swallowed into the echoless deep.

I suddenly realized that the surface had relief, staggering depths and dizzying heights. I began to wonder how I could make a safe landing on a surface that neither my altimeter nor my radar could find, a surface that could be any distance below, when that surface bumped up under me and I was down.

A

AFTER A MINUTE OR TWO I SAW Tally's vehicle hovering, the exhaust flickering yellow and blue. My heart skipped for a second. Flickering exhaust was a bad symptom; the jet of a properly functioning atomic-hydrogen rocket should be perfectly invisible. Her vehicle slid sideways, skittered over to a flat spot near my vehicle, and shut down without incident. I released my breath.

I went back to staring at my instruments. If they were correct, we were in atmosphere, although I couldn't remember any sign of airflow when I was descending. But I ran the mass spec, and it showed oxygen, nitrogen, argon, carbon dioxide; all at the right pressure and in the right proportions, even a trace of water vapor. As if this place were made for us. Waiting for us.

I turned off cabin life-support and opened the valve to equalize cabin pressure with the outside, but didn't crack my suit. There was no rush of cabin air out the pressure vent, and no red lights flashed on in the circuits monitoring cabin atmosphere to indicate

a leak to vacuum. I looked away, and then suddenly looked back. Something had moved. A sudden, irrational fear clutched my stomach. I took a deep, deliberate breath, and let it out slowly. Calm. I stared at the panel for a moment, then caught a flash of yellow flicker behind the panel. I bent my head down to look. In the tangle of wires behind the panel, a familiar pair of beady black eyes stared back at me.

I offered a finger, and the bird looked at it dubiously. "Might as well come out and enjoy the view, Sailor," I said. "You came this far, might as well see the sights."

"Girls just wanna have fun," Sailor complained, and stepped gingerly onto my gloved finger. I put him on the top of the panel. He shouldn't have been here. He didn't belong to anybody in particular; Sailor was the ship's bird and wandered freely about *Orpheus's* crew space, but he still shouldn't have been on the lander. He must have snuck in after the techs finished the preflight inspection, while we were still in the pilot's briefing. "You're in big trouble, fella," I told him.

"Trouble is my middle name," he agreed solemnly, and ducked his head to preen his chest feathers. He didn't seem to have the slightest interest in the strange landscape outside. "I'm looking for a good time, sailor, how about you?"

I contemplated Sailor as I watched Tally deploy a habitation balloon from her vehicle. He seemed fine, breathing the air of the enigma with no sign of ill effects. When the hab was inflated, I came down the ladder and walked over. Gravity felt right. Although I'd neglected to make a measurement, I was sure it couldn't be more than a percent or two away from one gee, and it felt a lot closer than that.

In a few minutes Leah approached from the other direction. I hesitated a long time, watching her walk up, then made the decision. If the cockatiel could breathe it, so could I. I vented my suit to ambient and took my helmet off. The air was cool and clean.

"That was one stupid move, boy," Tally greeted me, when I entered the inflated habitation bubble. "You suicidal, or just been paying no attention to your instruments at all?"

"Said it was OK to breathe."

She looked surprised, and turned to her own set of instrumentation. "Son of a fox. I'm sure I checked a minute ago."

"It was hard vacuum when we landed," said Leah, just entering the bubble. She straightened up, took off her helmet and shook out her hair. "Then it changed. This environment is just about perfect sea-level Earth normal. Have any of you looked up?"

I did. Through the transparent bubble, the sky was a pale cloudless blue.

"While we were descending, the sky was no color at all," Leah said, slowly. "It was fascinating. Not black, not even gray, but completely absent of color. And now — when we weren't watching — it changed. For us."

"You seem to have a malf on your main engine, Tally," I said. "Your exhaust was flickering."

"Yeah. I had engine warning lights flashing all over the place just before touchdown. Nothing I could do about it except land, though."

"I'll do a diagnostic on it."

"Right." Tally checked the charge on her two omniblasters. In addition to these, she was fielding a large sample pack and a smaller carryall pack. A pair of radios and an inertial navigation log, which would locate her position relative to her landing vehicle regardless of how far she traveled, dangled on her belt. I knew she had other weapons hidden away in the packs and elsewhere. "You can go back to your vehicles if you need to check instruments

there," she said abruptly, "but don't go any farther than that. Keep your suits on at all times. Assume that the environment could change back to vacuum at any instant. Keep a watch at all times. Got that?"

"Why?" I asked.

She went back into her t-vehicle and came out with a projectile gun strapped across her back. "It looks like we were expected. I'm going to scout around to find out if our welcome is a friendly one. Don't go exploring."

I watched her walk away. It seemed to me that she vanished over the horizon only a few moments after she started walking, but perhaps I was too wound up to notice the time passing. When I looked back, Leah was already cycling through the bubble's tiny airlock. I watched as she returned to her t-vehicle and began taking more measurements. There seemed something odd about the way she walked, and after a moment I realized that her feet never quite seemed to touch the surface. The fractal nature of the surface must extend to microscopic scale, with imperceptible crinkles smaller than the wavelength of light, packed densely enough to support her weight, insubstantial enough to be completely invisible.

I walked back to my own lander and fetched Sailor.

"There's a thousand things paradoxical about this place," Leah said when I returned. She was standing by the bubble, looking out into the perfect, cloudless sky.

I nodded. I had my suit sealed again, obedient to Tally's order, but I gestured to Sailor, who sat on my shoulder breathing the atmosphere and chattering softly to himself with no concern at all.

"No, the fact that we can breathe the air is the least among them. Can you see me?"

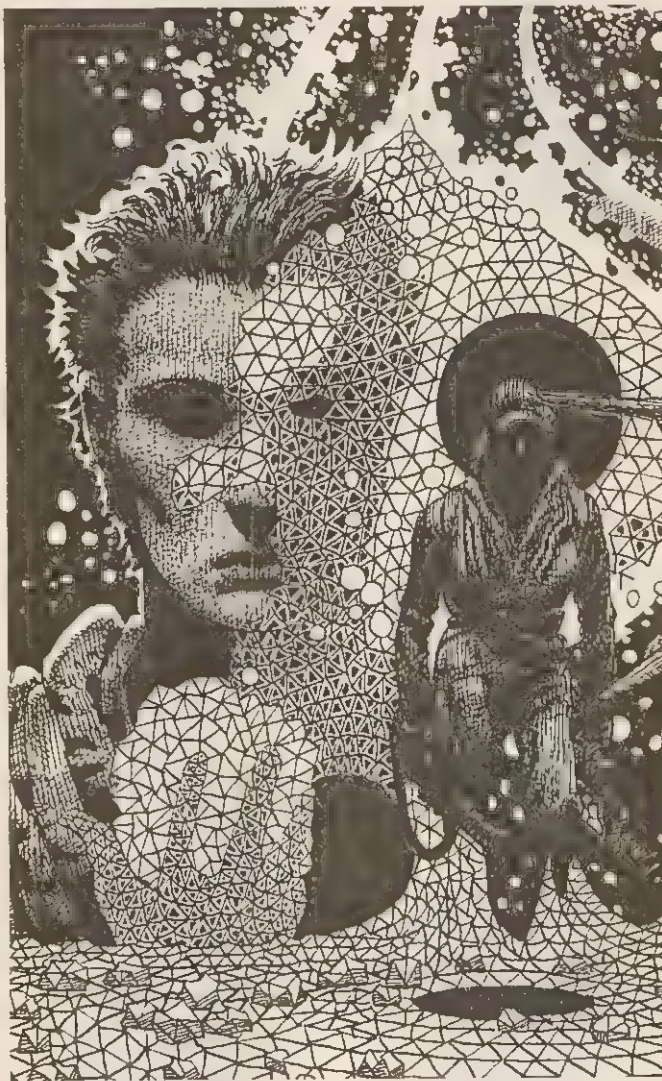
"Sure," I said.

"You can see the landscape OK?"

"Yes ..."

"How? We're half a trillion kilometers away from the sun. What's the light source?"

I looked around. It was true. Although everything was perfectly illuminated, there was no light source at all. No shadows. The light just was.



"Did you get a reading of the local gravitational acceleration before you got out of your vehicle?" she asked.

"Well, no. But I have a pretty good feel for gee. This feels pretty close to 1 gee."

"Feels that way to me, too. I'd say, no more than 1.05 gee. That's why I was so surprised when I looked at the instrument. 2.3."

"Two point three gees? Impossible. I know what overgee feels like. We're not in anything like 2 gees."

"Fascinating, isn't it? But think about it. We cut away from *Eurydice* at the 1 gee level, and went down. Now, what if the meter is right? We've had problems with all the other measurements, but so far everything related to gravity has been dead on."

"But that's im ..."

She held up a hand. "Not so fast. The gee level would still *feel* right to us if our time sense has been sped up proportionately."

"Time dilation? But that would take incredible gravity fields ..."

"Not exactly time dilation, I don't think. But something similar. I think when we dropped from *Eurydice*, we dropped down a lot more than just a few dozen kilometers. I think that space in this vicinity is highly distorted. I think we *did* drop down to the 2.3 gee contour."

"But that's ... " I tried to do a quick calculation in my head. Newtonian gravity ... one over r squared ... square root of 2.3 ... "Almost nine thousand kilometers? We didn't drop down nine thousand kilometers. That's crazy!"

"Eight thousand eight hundred."

"Leah, we didn't have enough *fuel* to descend nine thousand kilometers against 1-gee. Much less against overgee."

"Ah, but you're forgetting: Space is distorted here. To us, the distance appeared to be less. A *lot* less. And the closer we get to the center of this object — or at least, to the event horizon — the more space is compressed."

"Now we're really having fun," Sailor added, happy to join the conversation.

"Event horizon?" I said. "You think this is a black hole?"

She shook her head. "Quite the opposite. You know better than that. A black hole would slow time down, not speed it up. This is the opposite of a black hole."

"A white hole?"

"No. There's a danger in using such easy buzz-words, Tinker-man. It's not a white hole. Don't try to categorize this with a simple word, you'll only poison your thinking. It's not that simple. Not that simple at all."

"Trouble is my middle name," said Sailor.

STANDARD PROCEDURE WAS FOR US to stay in constant radio contact with each other, but we had problems even getting a reliable signal from Tally's locator beacon, and had no luck at all with voice. I started the delicate work of opening up the engine of Tally's t-vehicle, and Leah went to work on science measurements.

It was several hours before Tally returned. She had her helmet dangling back over her shoulder, and had peeled the gloves of her suit back to the elbow fittings, apparently to give her better dexterity with the projectile rifle that she had unslung and now carried loosely at the ready. "You can take off your suits," she said.

"No danger?" Leah inquired.

"Oh, there's danger out there," she said. "Plenty of danger. Just not from the air."

She checked the gun, safetied it, put it down, and then slid the sample pack off her back and sat down crosslegged next to it.

Seated, she looked like a black iron statue of some ancient god of death, surrounded with an aura of quiet power. When she spoke again her tone was more relaxed, and contemplative. "Not at this level, though," she said. "I do believe that this level is safe. They seem to stay on the lower level."

"Level?" asked Leah.

"They?" I said. "What 'they'?"

"Things," Tally said. "Dangerous things. Not too bad, if you're prepared for them and don't get careless. They're fast and have wicked claws, but they don't seem to be too smart. Got two of them, and the rest kept their distance." She opened her pack. The thing she brought out was the size of a small bobcat, but with longer teeth and six legs. The front legs had fixed, razor-sharp claws. Tally manipulated the hind leg to show how it was jointed. "Note the musculature. See how it hinges? Built for speed and maneuverability. Now, take a look at the center of gravity." She picked it up. "It can run on the hind four, leaving the front ones free as weapons. That's important; makes it a lot more dangerous than a cat. It doesn't have to pounce to attack, and it can slash out at you at the same time that it's jinking like hell to avoid your shot. Took me two shots to nail this one." She lifted her sleeve to show where the loose thermal-control layer of her suit was torn. "The center paws are dangerous, too."

I was impressed. Anything that made Tally shoot twice was something to be taken seriously indeed. I looked at her face. She was good at keeping her feelings to herself, but from the brightness of her eyes and the almost imperceptible curvature of her lips, I suddenly realized that she was more excited than I had ever seen her. Something wickedly dangerous had attacked her, almost gotten through her defenses, and it made her happy.

"What do you mean by 'level'?" Leah asked.

"I think," said Tally, "that this planet is layered like chinese balls. Shells within shells. I found a large hole" — this would be no problem, such holes were all about us, some of them tiny, others huge — "and lowered myself down."

"What was it like?"

"Just exactly like here. The sky was a slightly darker shade of blue. The rope almost looked like it was hanging from nothing, and the hole I had jumped down was faintly visible like a hazy, perfectly circular cloud. But there were animals down there. More holes, too. To a lower level yet."

"That explains why we had problems with radio contact," said Leah. "Radio propagates well enough along horizontal paths here, but not very well up and down."

"Any ideas about that?" I asked.

"I have some thoughts about what's causing it, yes, but if I'm right, there's not much we can do."

"Put a relay at the edge of the hole to boost the signal?"

Leah looked dubious. "We can try it, but it probably won't help."

"How far down was it?" I asked her. I had looked down into the holes, but the strange confusion of depth kept me. It could have been a meter or a kilometer.

"It's odd," said Tally. "From below it looked like the opening was kilometers up above me, but it couldn't have been more than a meter. I didn't even need the rope — I could jump up."

"Really?" Leah said, suddenly exhibiting interest. "But your head wasn't above the level of the, ah, the ceiling?"

"No. It was very strange."

"Ah," said Leah. "Not the first strange thing." She was silent for a moment and then said, "We have another problem, and now is perhaps a good time to bring it up. The pickup by *Eurydice*."

"What's the problem there?" asked Tally.

"I need to measure time," Leah said. "If what I'm beginning to suspect is correct, time for us is moving much faster than time on *Eurydice*. Unless we're in sync, *Eurydice* won't be coming down to meet us at the same time we're going up. We've been out of touch — that radio echo effect. I have to do some comparing of clocks to figure out just exactly how much difference in time there is, but I haven't been able to get through to *Orpheus*."

"And your plan is?" Tally prompted. She didn't seem worried. Sur-

vival in hazardous environments was her specialty, but she was willing to leave the physics end to Leah.

"I've got a number of back-up options. Since we can't get a radio signal through to *Orpheus*, the first thing I'm going to do is to launch a rocket probe. I can put a couple of experiments on it that I want to do anyway, and the main payload of the probe will be a radio link to *Orpheus*. I've been looking at the recordings of how fast we lost signal as we descended, and I think that with the power we have available, an altitude gain of a few hundred kilometers measured in our current frame should allow us to squirt a signal to *Orpheus*. We will download the data we have so far to *Orpheus*'s main computer, give them some precise information on our surface location — remember, although they know where they dropped us, they can't see the surface, and don't have a guess as to the enigma's rotation rate. Finally, the probe will squirt over our clock readings, and download from *Orpheus* the clock reading from her computer and also the clock reading that *Eurydice* had when she docked."

Tally nodded. "Sounds like a good plan to me. About time we called home anyway."

THE ROCKET PROBE WAS A SPHERE about a meter in diameter filled with ultrapressurized atomic hydrogen, with a tiny catalytic engine on the bottom to convert the atomic-hydrogen fuel into a supersonic jet of diatomic-hydrogen exhaust. Tally said she thought we were safe to go to the

lower level as long as we kept alert, and while Leah readied the probe, Tally and I deflated the bubble habitat and moved it down. I didn't see any of Tally's attack animals.

Down here, both the sky and the ground had the fractal pattern of nested circles.

When Leah got her rocket back with the data from *Orpheus*, I breathed a sigh of relief. Now that we had a method for communication, we were in a much better position. Tally went off exploring as soon as the probe hovered down; not without first warning us to keep alert and not to stray until she came back and told us it was safe. Leah vanished into the bubble to work with the data. After a while, I went in and asked her what she was learning.

"I put a precise atomic clock on the probe. Now that it's returned, I've got a direct comparison of time readings. As I expected, the more altitude the rocket got, the slower time passed for it relative to us. The returned clock was 23 minutes behind the control clock I kept here. It's the exact inverse of the gravitational twin paradox. Then, I measured the Doppler shift of the carrier wave from the probe. This gave me a second measure of the time dilation of the probe relative to us, and also of the compression of radial distance. From that we can get the metric of the space we're in."

"And?"

She smiled, her eyes misty and slightly distant. "I'm still thinking about it." She started to put on her suit.

"Where are you going?"

"To look around a bit. This place is fascinating. Everything I see sparks new ideas, new ways to investigate."

"But Tally warned us ..."

She picked up an omniblaster and fastened the strap around her shoulder. "I'll be careful."

I watched her walk off. She might have asked if I wanted to go with her, but she hadn't. She had said nothing. I wondered why I was here. Wondered why I followed her.

She vanished over the horizon faster than I thought possible.

DESPITE TALLY'S WARNINGS OF DANGER, LEAH RETURNED WITHOUT difficulties. She brought with her a sample bag filled with odd crystals. They were like the landscape, composed of circles within circles, to as small a scale as the eye could see, in shades of spectroscopically pure colors that were different at every angle you viewed them. When she picked one up, her fingers seemed to hover infinitesimally away from its surface, not quite touching it, an illusion of the infinitely recurved fractal surface.

Tally returned much later. Her suit was scraped and in one place the fabric was ripped right through to the liner, but she said nothing. Leah only briefly looked up from her work analyzing the samples she'd found. "No report, Tally?"

"None yet."

Leah only grunted, and turned back to her crystals.

This place, whatever it was, seemed to be illuminated continuously, with no discernible day-night cycles. We must have been up for 40 hours straight before Leah called a break. Sailor had long ago found a perch on one of Leah's instruments and tucked his head under his wing, occasionally opening one eye to whistle his annoyance at the uninterrupted light. We were all weary. Leah stripped down to her panties, completely unselfconscious, and designated a spot on the padded floor as her bed. We slept in a pile, Leah and I, innocent as children. Tally slept, too, I think, although it was hard to tell, since she sat upright by the airlock, gun on her lap.

I dreamed that I was walking across the fractal landscape. In the dream it seemed completely normal and comfortable to me. There was a girl from my hometown walking with me, someone I'd known all my life, but hadn't thought of in years. I'd played with her as a child, gone to school with her, and now she was grown up. Whenever I glanced over in her direction, she was just out of sight, but we talked as we wandered across the landscape. She pointed out sights as we walked: a cluster of needles a thousand kilometers high, a crystal that trembled and then spoke in some strange alien language when it was touched, marvels that set my mind whirling. My delight amazed her, because it all seemed ordinary to her, since she lived here. It didn't bother me that I couldn't remember her name; I was sure it would come back to me in a moment. Then we sat by a cluster of crystals, on opposite sides, and she asked me about Leah.

"You don't really love her," she said, when I had told her everything. "I think you are in love with love."

"No," I said. I didn't want to think about what she had said. "No. You don't understand."

"Then teach me," she said softly, but before I could decide that there was no possible way to explain the complexity of the way I felt, I awoke to find Tally standing over me with a projectile rifle.

She was in a combat crouch, all her senses alert. "What the hell you think you're doing, boy?" she asked. "You want to go wandering, that's fine, but you carry an omniblaster with you, and you check with me first."

I looked around. The habitat bubble was nowhere to be seen. I was sitting by the cluster of crystals where, in the dream, I had stopped to talk with — what was her name? I'd never known such a girl. I'd been an only child; my parents had moved so frequently that I never kept the friends I made at school for more than a year. But she had been so real — she was all the friends I'd never made. A sudden sense of loss hit me so hard that for a moment I couldn't breathe. She didn't exist. She was my best friend, the only person I felt completely safe confiding in, and she'd never existed.

As an adult I'd kept the pattern I'd learned in childhood, never staying in one place, moving two or three times a year. Homes were temporary, places to put my things for a while, but not to get attached to. I had no real friends; I didn't even know how to make friends. Except for Leah.

But Leah was not the type of friend I could open my heart to. I'd always been too much in awe of her; too afraid that I'd lose her by showing weakness to ever risk showing myself.

And Tally; Tally was a friend.

Tally glared down at me. "You left so quietly I didn't even know you were gone until I heard the perimeter alarm." Suddenly she

grinned. "Didn't realize you could move so quiet, boy, didn't know you had it in you." She clapped me on the arm and laughed. "Got past me! How 'bout that! We may actually make something of you some day. If you survive your own stupidity, that is."

"So," she said. "You ready to go back to base now?"

IN THE MORNING, TALLY SAID NOTHING ABOUT my walk during the previous "night," and I said nothing as well. By the time I awoke, Leah was already preoccupied with preparing the rocket probe for another launch.

The first thing that "day," Leah launched the probe again, to update our clocks and to squirt her latest results across to *Orpheus* in orbit high above us. I went out to finish doing the diagnostic of the malfunction in Tally's t-vehicle. By the time Leah's probe landed, I had traced the problem to a misaligned injector, probably knocked askew during the pyro separation from *Eurydice*.

The probe returned with its memory filled with suggestions from the scientific staff, and a message from the captain. Leah downloaded the memory to her research unit and read it with some annoyance. Then she called in Tally and me.

"Captain Shen suggests we return to *Orpheus*," Leah said. "He's nervous about the lack of continuous radio contact; doesn't like having to use a probe as a burst relay."

I was puzzled. "The old man wants to send another science crew down? They'd have the same problem, wouldn't they?"

Leah shook her head. "He wants to boost home. He says we've done the flags-and-footprints thing, the mission's successful, let's scoot."

The reference to a first landing as a flags-and-footprints mission was a historical relic. Nobody used flags to claim a planet any more, and the fractal surface wasn't like some virgin regolith that held footprints forever.

"Suggested, you say?" Tally asked. Depending on how it was phrased, a captain's suggestion might or might not be an order.

"Suggested," Leah agreed. "He left it to our judgment of how valuable our work here was. My feeling is, flags and footprints and forget it? Jigger that. We're here; there's a lot to learn."

"So let's stay a while," Tally said. "Tinkerman?"

I looked at the two of them. If the captain was nervous, I was nervous. But then, it was his job to play cautious. I shrugged, feigning confidence. "I'm pretty sure that the vehicles are OK for lift-off, but it wouldn't hurt if I did a test-firing on Tally's engine to verify the job I did fixing the injector," I said, "and then took a look at the other two t-vehicles to check that they don't have the same problem. I suppose that could take a day, maybe two if I took my time."

"Perfect," Tally said. "Nobody can argue with that. In fact, it could take you three days, maybe even more, who could say?"

"Also," Leah said, "Up there, time goes slow. Relative to us down here, I mean. Even if we take our sweet time exploring, by their clocks we'll be back soon enough. Especially if we spend most of our time farther down, where the time effect will be even faster."

Tally smiled. "That's great. There's still a lot I want to investigate."

I'VE SET UP A PERIMETER DEFENSE AT 500 METERS; STAY INSIDE THAT." Tally brought out another projectile gun and placed it by the bubble's airlock. "I want you to carry omniblaster at all times, even inside the bubble. I can't overemphasize how dangerous this place is. The hexacats on this level seem to be territorial, so they won't bother you unless you violate their space, but I can't guarantee anything about the larger hexapedal carnivores on the third level, or the fourth level beasts."

"You've penetrated two levels down?" Leah was interested now.

"Three. Don't follow." She looked back at us. "I'm going to scout out a safe site to place the hab bubble another level down. That should buy us some additional time before the captain gets the hots to order our asses back up. When I've checked the area, I'll get you." Tally put her hand on my arm. "Keep an eye on Leah, OK? She tends to go off." This was her oblique way of saying that I was the one who tended to wander off. It was her only mention of last night.

I nodded. "Right."

As Tally went exploring, Leah went back to examining the crystals she had collected. She was shining a low-power laser on one, watching the pattern of light reflecting from the myriad facets. The pattern shifted as she moved the crystal, now looking like some masterwork of an unknown genius of abstract art, now changing until it resembled a line of handwriting in some alien language. I walked up behind her and put my hand on her back, massaging her shoulder muscles. "It looks like something, almost," I said, "almost like something I should be able to recognize."

Leah replied abstractedly. "Information," she said. "The fractal pattern is self-similar at all size scales, but never exactly repeating. It stores information at all levels. This rock is like a sheet of paper, infinitely large, infinitely crumpled, almost infinitely dense with information." She shifted the laser. An alien landscape with a twisted, writhing sea. "A perfect crystal has no entropy, stores no information. Add disorder to the crystal, and the disorder contains information. Perfect disorder — infinite entropy — is indistinguishable from maximally dense information." She pulled the crystal out from the laser, and held it in front of her. It was hard to look at; the brain couldn't grasp the shape in its entirety, the complexity within complexity.

"But what does it mean?" I said.

"Nothing. Information without context is meaningless." She tossed the crystal on the ground. "Without intelligence, information is just ... another form of entropy. The crystals down here are a bit more complex than the ones on the surface. I'm going to check the next few levels down."

"But Tally warned ..."

"Tally is obsessed with danger. Of course she finds danger; that's what she's looking for. I'm looking for information." She waved away my imminent objection. "Oh, I'm not stupid; I'll be careful. I'll keep a watch out for danger, and I'll carry a blaster. Even one of Tally's over-powered projectile guns, if you insist on it."

She was crazy, I suddenly realized. Not just impulsive, but literally, quantifiably insane. The psychologists even had a name for what she had. They called it new-planet syndrome, or explorer's euphoria. Long ago, a mission briefing had warned us that everybody got it, at least a little, the first time they set foot on a new planet. The all-encompassing sensations of *alienness* overwhelms the critical thinking of the brain, producing giddiness and euphoria. The first explorers on Miranda had been so fascinated by the ever-changing vistas of the ice cliffs that they had continued trekking long past the halfway point on their oxygen consumption, and had to be rescued by an emergency drop of spare oxygen canisters from orbit. It had happened even on Earth, explorers of the Antarctic or of Africa continuing to press on to new vistas long after all common sense would have told them to return to base. Explorer's euphoria was most pronounced when the explorers were cut off from contact with the quotidian world. The Miranda explorers had been out of radio contact for several days.

We were out of radio contact.

It wasn't fatal. Oh, it could cause people to make hasty decisions, but the Miranda team had been an extreme case. As long as we guarded against it, we should be OK.

I couldn't fault Leah. We all had it. I, too, found myself making excuses to stay. I, too, wanted to explore.

"Fine, then," I said. "I'm going with you."

Leah turned to look at me, surprised, and then shrugged and turned her back. "Suit yourself."

She set out at a fast pace, almost a run, without saying another word. I stuffed a spare radio beacon into a pack with my inertial loca-

tor and backup transponder, and scrambled to keep up. When I finally caught up with her, she didn't acknowledge my presence, but she did slow her pace infinitesimally. There was a distant look in her eyes. I asked her opinion about what we were seeing. Her reply was only to ask me to quit making meaningless chatter; she was trying to observe the environment and didn't need any distractions.

I thought that she was in no mood to communicate, and then she turned to me, as if she hadn't just snapped at me, and said, "Imaginary time."

"What?"

"I need a paradigm shift here, Tinkerman." She picked up a crystal. It seemed unique and beautiful, with delicate filaments feathering the edges like an ornate crystalline snowflake. Unique and beautiful, just exactly like every other one all over this strange landscape. "I'm just spinning wheels, free associating. Every measurement I make points to imaginary time."

"What does that mean?"

"I'm not sure. I would have said imaginary numbers are just a mathematical tool, but ... look. As we go deeper into the gravity well here, our time vector — the passage of time we experience — is rotated in the imaginary plane."

"Does that mean what we experience down here isn't real?"

She threw the crystal down on the ground in disgust. "No! The first thing you have to understand is, there is nothing at all 'imaginary' about imaginary numbers. That's just a name. All numbers are figments of the human imagination; imaginary numbers are just as real as any other numbers."

"Then what does it mean?"

"It means that the time we experience here is partly in a direction orthogonal to time experienced outside. Hours go by here, and only minutes pass outside."

"That's time dilation."

"Yes, but in reverse. The mathematics are the same as a Minkowski rotation."

"But what does it mean?"

She shrugged. "I'm just spinning wheels here, Tinkerman. Speculating. Like I said, I'm looking for a paradigm shift. Now, shut up and observe the environment."

The environment was worth observing. It was spectacular, always changing. We traversed razor-thin bridges over seemingly bottomless gorges, with our feet never seeming quite to touch the ground, and then an instant later we seemed to be at the bottom of a huge chasm, looking up through a narrow cleft. We saw none of the predators that Tally had found to be so dangerous, and this fact struck me as odd, since she had originally found them easily, just moments after reaching this level. In fact, it occurred to me that the very existence of the animals was more than a bit odd. What did they subsist on? Where were the plants, the food animals; where was the energy source for their metabolism? How could there be vertebrate animals half a trillion kilometers from Earth? Spread out across the great dark, we had found other planets with life, in distant solar systems, but few had even superficially terrestrial body forms. And, most important of all, why did we accept it all so calmly, and with so little curiosity?

But I wasn't likely to get any answers from Leah, not with the mood she was in. Perhaps later she would be more expansive.

The opening Leah chose to take down to the next level looked exactly like a dozen others we had skirted, a pattern of perfect circles. She put a radio relay on the edge and tested it. The radio relay had not worked very well in communicating with Tally, but it was a safety measure to take nonetheless. If nothing else, it served as a

locator to mark this spot for later reference, if for some reason the inertial logs that we all carried should fail.

It seemed to me just then that there were eyes watching us. I looked around cautiously, but in the anfractuosity of the terrain there could be a thousand watchers, or none. Wait; was that a movement? Something sparkled.

Leah looked over the edge, and then carefully lowered her equipment. "Thanks for coming with me," she said. "You don't need to wait. I'll be fine."

Leah put her hand on the edge, swung both feet over, and dropped.

I was torn. Should I follow her down, or should I investigate the glimmer in the distance, try to find out what — or who — was watching? It took me only an instant to decide. Leah had very clearly invited me not to follow her.

I hiked over to where I had seen the sparkle. It was more difficult to find than I had thought, since distance and perspective in this place were hard to judge, but with some searching I found it. It was a scrap of multilayer insulation, gold-coated plastic foil only a few microns thick, the type that had once been used to insulate the hydrogen tanks of rockets. A type of foil that had been obsolete for decades.

If it had been on the surface, I might have dismissed it as some ancient piece of debris. Hundreds, possibly thousands of rocket stages had used such insulation. But for it to get down here, something must have brought it down from the surface. What? Or, who?



THERE WAS NO POINT IN WAITING FOR LEAH, SO I WENT BACK TO THE habitat bubble, contemplating the existence of the tiny scrap of foil. When I reached the bubble, I found another surprise waiting: Sailor had company. He was twittering and whistling and hopping madly up and down, preening his feathers, posing, and then frantically preening again. Just outside the bubble wall was the object of his affections: another cockatiel, a light green bird with a brilliant blue feather ruff, perched outside the bubble.

"Hey, sailor!" he said, and then did his wolf whistle. "Hey, sailor! Hey sailor! Wanna show a girl a good time?"

The strange bird whistled back, a few bars from the southern anthem. Then it said, in a low, sultry voice, "Hey there, brother. You ain't just whistling Dixie."

I approached the other bird cautiously, and extended a finger. Without hesitation, it hopped onto my finger and then up to perch on my shoulder. A friendly bird. Tame. That was crazy. How had it gotten here? Refugee from some crash?

It takes an expert, or another cockatiel, to tell the sex of a cockatiel. I decided from the way Sailor was whistling and preening that this one had to be female. "Let's call you Olive, little bird," I said. "Now where the hell did you come from?"

"Space, the final frontier," Olive said, and then she whistled Dixie.

A crash. It was the only explanation that made sense. It was crazy that our computers didn't have any record of an accident, records of the loss of some ship headed somewhere that might pass this direction in space, and results of an investigation of the cause, but nothing else made any sense. Some time, and not too long ago, a ship had crashed here. The bit of foil, the bird. If we could land on this place; so could others. The bird must be a survivor.

And what if there had been other survivors?

WHEN LEAH CAME BACK, I SHOWED HER THE NEW BIRD AND EXPLAINED my speculations that there had been a crash.

"Don't be ridiculous, Tinkerman," she said. "Think about it for a moment, will you? How big is this place? A hundred million square kilometers? How many levels? Just think about it. Suppose that there was some earlier landing, one that we somehow never heard about, unlikely as that may seem. What are the chances that our landing spot would be anywhere near the other spot? A million to one, Tinkerman. A million to one, minimum."

"But the bird ..."

"Information," she said. "A bird is just information in another form, just like you and me and everything else; all information. In the end, how is a bird any more remarkable than a crystal, or even a rock? It's not. Information in different form, that's all."

She wasn't making any sense. Explorer's euphoria; she had it bad. We all had it. It was time for us to go back to *Orpheus*, way past time. But we couldn't go back until Tally returned.

"Entropy is information," Leah said. "A perfect sine wave carries no information, no entropy. A perfect crystal has no entropy, no information. If information is stored in the crystal, the entropy increases. When maximum information is stored, the crystal is indistinguishable from a random lattice."

Leah looked at me, her eyes distant, bright. "A bird? A bird, Tinkerman, you think that's odd? There are stranger things on this place than any bird."

We had to leave. But how could we go back now? Whether Leah helped or not, I had to search for survivors.

THE RADIO HADN'T REVEALED ANY unexpected signals, but then, we hadn't been broadcasting. If there had been survivors of a crash, it was possible that they could be scanning, waiting desperately for a signal, perhaps unaware that we were already here. The weird radio echo would have meant that *Orpheus* would never have received their distress call. Down here, though? Odd as radio propagation here was, radio was still the first thing to try. I swept the international space-rescue band for signals: no luck, not even static. She might just not be broadcasting, though. They might not. She — they — might be waiting for a signal. I recorded a message into the transceiver's RAM, "Hello, are you there? Please respond. Hello, are you there?" and set the transceiver to broadcast it, slowly scanning the message across all of the rescue-band frequencies. When she replied — that is, if she, they, replied — the frequency monitor would lock in on the signal and alert me.

I couldn't think straight; the sourceless light and the odd landscapes were beginning to disorient me. I stared outside, and the strange vista seemed to hook me, seemed to pull me into it. I felt that I was vast, larger than planets; and then suddenly that I was infinitesimally small. Something was blinking at the edge of my vision.

I was tired, that was all. Just tired. I crawled away, laid down, and in an instant was asleep.

When I awoke, some timeless period later, the message light on the transceiver was blinking fiercely. It had been blinking last evening — night? What time was it? My message must have been answered the very instant it had been sent.

The reply message was only five words, not rushed, not desperate, not repeated; the voice of a girl or young woman. "I'm here. I've been waiting."

Leah was gone, out exploring again. Maybe she hadn't slept at all. I scanned the radio spectrum again. Empty. No, wait, not quite empty. There was a carrier wave. No further messages, but a carrier wave persisted, as if a transmitter had accidentally been left energized when nobody was there. Enough to compute a vector. I copied the vector down, erased the buffer, and set the scanner to capture and hold anything new. Then I grabbed an omniblaster and a portable receiver, and set out on the rescue run.

The vector led down a level, two. It could only have been tremendous luck that the survivor's camp had been aligned so that the radio waves had been able to make it in a straight line. I was careful to put radio repeaters at each drop site to serve as locator beacons, an automatic precaution against getting disoriented, although there was no chance of that; the landscape was unforgettable, luminous against my brain. Another level down.

The site was just as I'd imagined it, a half-cylinder of gleaming multilayer foil propped with titanium struts to make a crude tent, with a parabolic antenna beside it aimed back the way I'd come, a dish salvaged from some unlucky ship. The reflective foil mirrored back distorted images of the landscape, so that the tent blended into the background, not out of place at all, but merely one more strange shape among many. I shouted greetings as I approached, and thought I heard some faint reply from inside.

The tent was like the enigma, as I passed through layer after layer of crinkled foil, thinner than spider web. Inside was the same sourceless light.

Her voice was familiar and strange; a voice I'd known all my life, a voice I'd never heard before. Her words were almost the same as the words she'd said on the radio. "I've been waiting for you."

My words stuck in my throat. Tears welled up in my eyes, and I couldn't see. I couldn't think of anything to say. She waited, calmly looking at me, and her perfect calm made my own fluster even worse. I suddenly realized that I had an erection, and turned away, embarrassed. I realized that that would seem even more odd. Had she seen? What did she think? How long had she been here?

"I'm —," I started, and stopped. "Greet — hello. I'm, my name is David Tinkerman."

"Of course it is." She smiled then. "Davy Tinkerman. I've been waiting for you."

It was impossible that she knew me, and yet somehow I, too, knew her from somewhere. No one had called me Davy since I'd been maybe eight years old. And suddenly I flashed on it. She had been a baby-sitter, when I'd been eight, and we lived — where? I couldn't remember which house. Her name was right on the tip of my tongue. God, how could I have forgotten? I'd been infatuated with her, hopelessly in love, back when I was eight and she'd been, what, fifteen? Unapproachable. I'd sworn, back then, that when I grew up I would find her and marry her, that I would love her forever, and she hadn't laughed at me, she'd nodded and said she'd wait.

I hadn't thought of her in decades.

She was older now, no longer a teenager. But she ought to be years older than I, and yet she wasn't. It was the time dilation effect, of course, it must be. She must have gone into space at the first opportunity, just a year or two after my family had moved away — my family always moved away — she'd gone to space. She must have crashed here on her first mission. What, twenty years ago? Thirty?

"How long have you been here?" I asked.

"A minute. A decade." She shrugged. "A million years. Time doesn't have much meaning here, I don't think. An hour, an eternity." She smiled again, and my heart shattered. "I'm glad you found me, Davy. I've been waiting for you forever."

We talked as we followed my trail back to the bubble, she follow-

ing right behind me, close enough that I could sometimes feel the tickle of her breath on my neck, feel her infrared luminosity glowing against my back. I tried to hide the tumescence in my crotch by staying slightly ahead of her. I told her about the years we'd lost, how it had come to pass that I'd gone into space, about projects I'd worked on, my feelings of pride when something I'd built flew. Somehow, as much as I talked, and poured out my heart, I never quite happened to mention Leah. It didn't matter; I knew that she knew. We would have time to talk, the whole voyage back to tell each other our life stories. They would like each other, I was sure; become fast friends, after they got acquainted.

When the bubble finally got into view, I stopped, flung out an arm, and turned to her. "Here we are —"

There was nobody behind me.

THERE WAS A SURVIVOR, I KNOW," I TOLD LEAH. "I MET HER. I TALKED to her, Leah!"

"Of course." Leah did not seem convinced; in fact, she did not seem interested at all. She'd barely acknowledged my presence when I'd come back in, shouting excitedly about finding a survivor of the crash. "I've been thinking about information theory, Tinkerman. Speculating, really. There is tremendous information content in these crystals, did I tell you that already? I'm just beginning to learn how to access it."

"Leah, just get this!" I said. "Can you believe it, it was somebody I actually knew! A girl I knew; she ran away to space when I was a kid."

"Incredible stuff, Tinkerman, even mind-boggling, if I may use that term." For a second I thought she was responding to what I'd said, instead of still talking about her crystals. "Yes, of course you knew her."

"I did! She ..."

Leah picked up a crystal and held it in front of her, turning it from side to side in her hand. "Then what was her name?"

"She — what?"

Leah looked up at me, the first time she'd looked up from her crystals since I'd returned. "You said you knew her. What was her name? Surely if you knew her, you know her name?"

I opened my mouth, then closed it. Of course I knew her name. Of course I did. I just couldn't think of it at the moment.

"I've been thinking about information theory, Tinkerman," Leah said. My lack of response to her question didn't seem to bother her in the slightest. "Have you ever thought about information theory?"

I sighed. "What about it?"

"A black hole swallows information. You already knew that, of course."

"Sure. A black hole swallows everything."

"Yes, but most particularly, it swallows information. It swallows mass, yes of course, but it emits Hawking radiation. Matter in, energy out, no problem. Einstein could have predicted that. But information, now that's a problem."

I wanted to talk about the girl, the survivor. I would have to go back and find her. Had she gotten lost? Had she followed me at all? I couldn't remember the last time she'd spoken to me as we'd walked back toward the bubble; I couldn't remember for sure if she'd said anything at all. But Leah obviously was in no state to discuss the subject. Maybe it was best to humor her. "Why is that a problem?"

"Tinkerman, think about it. A black hole is a cosmic eraser! Matter and information go in; energy comes out. A spherical shell of clean, randomized, content-free energy. What happens to the information?"

"So it gets erased. Does it matter?"

"Does it matter! Tinkerman, in quantum mechanics, information is entropy. Entropy is conserved. You can't just erase it. Tinkerman, where does the information go?"

"The lost-and-found counter of a bus depot in Cleveland," I said. "And, frankly, I don't think I could care less. Look, Leah —"

At that moment, Tally burst through the bubble's airlock door. She looked awful. The projectile rifle was hanging loose in her hands, as if she was almost too tired to hold onto it. A jagged gash had been torn down the side of her face, and one side of her jumpsuit hung in tatters, exposing her underwear, which, I noted with a tiny fragment of

my attention, was black silk, not at all what I would have expected. In other circumstances, it might have been sexy. The rip also exposed the knife and the omniblaster she had strapped to her thigh, and an incredible amount of dried and caked blood. I hoped it wasn't all hers.

Wearily, dirty, and bloody; for all of that she was grinning madly.

"Tally!" I said. "Boy, am I glad to see you! Listen, I need your help. I found ..."

"Save it, Tinkerman. I'm declaring an emergency."

"But you have to hear this ..."

"I said, stuff it! Look, for the duration, you're going to have to stick to this level. There's some bad shit three levels down, stuff too hot for you to handle. No insult, OK? But you're not trained for this kind of trouble. I've cleared this level; you're safe here as long as you keep your eyes open."

All the time Tally was talking, she was gathering stuff from the hab. The two omniblasters were on fast-charge. She picked up a lot of other things, cramming them into a web-back she slung over her shoulder: rounds for the projectile rifle, canisters for a cooking stove, spare battery packs. She grabbed some other parts from her personal effects. With a sudden feeling of disorientation, I recognized them as components removed from her t-vehicle. Struts. An energy pack. Pieces of the backup guidance computer. A spare gyro. All back-up or secondary system stuff, but you just *don't* tear apart the backups, not on a vehicle you're planning to trust your life to.

"Man, who would have thought they'd be so hostile?" she said, her voice musing, almost purring. "Who would have thought they'd be so *fast*?"

She put the pieces together with sure, easy assurance, as if they were a grade-school science kit. I'd worked with those parts, and parts like them, for most of my life, and I'd never seen anything quite like the object she was assembling. Nevertheless, I could recognize a weapon when I saw one.

"But — but I just came back from three levels down," I said.

"There's a survivor ..."

She whirled on me. "You were three levels down? Great Lord Jesus, didn't I tell you to stay put until I cleared the area? You're lucky you still got your head attached to your shoulders. Don't do it again. That's an order."

"You two, can up the bubble — no, scrub that, just grab your essentials and your blasters and get up out of here. Top priority. Get your backsides up top and get the landers ready to go. I'll join you pronto, but don't wait for me; if I don't show up, call for a pick-up and boost out to *Eurydice* maximum ASAP. Don't hold waiting for me. You copy?"

And as abruptly as she had come, not even waiting for a reply, Tally was gone.

THEY WERE MAD, BOTH LEAH AND Tally, and Tally was dangerous. But I had to rescue a survivor. I picked up the sample bag where Tally had deposited the body of the creature that had attacked her so long ago. Even dead, it looked menacing, with fangs curved for ripping, large eyes set wide to triangulate prey. I had never seen one alive, not even at a distance. I had met nothing alive, nothing at all, save for a bird, and a girl.

"I'm going back for the survivor," I told Leah. "When I get back, we boost for the return pick-up. I hope to hell that Tally gets back. Can you get ready to message *Orpheus*?"

"Black holes emit energy," she said. "At the event horizon — if you could reach the event horizon — the temperature of a black hole is infinite."

I walked over and put both of my hands on her shoulders. I wanted

to shake her; instead I knelt down and looked up into her eyes. "Leah, are you listening at all?"

"Of course I'm listening, Tinkerman. Return pick-up, two of us plus one crash survivor. Tally, if she gets back. No problem. Now, have you been listening to a thing I've been telling you, or have I just been feeding information into a black hole?"

I sighed. "You can message *Orpheus*?"

"Of course. Look, this may be important. Entropy is connected to temperature. The energy content of information must be proportional to temperature."

"I'm leaving now, Leah."

"Approaching the center of the enigma, we must be approaching, not an event horizon, but an antihorizon. You can never reach the center, of course; the concept of a center may not even have physical meaning. The temperature approaches negative infinity. The necessary solution to the black hole paradox; the most improbable state."

She was still talking to herself when I left.

AS I RETURNED DOWNWARD, contemplating the odd behavior of Tally, I had a sudden thought. If time goes faster the deeper you go into the enigma, and if the place really did have life forms on it ... then, deep inside, the life must evolve at a tremendous rate. How fast did time speed up? How many levels were there? Suddenly I realized that, if space were distorted, then there might be an infinite number of levels.

I passed the last of the radio beacons I'd left, and there ahead of me was the cobbled-together hut, with the parabolic dish. There was a sudden hollow feeling inside me, and I knew she wouldn't be there.

I rushed through the layers of foil, and there she was, waiting. She was slender and beautiful, and my body ached all over. My breath came so short that I could hardly speak. "Why didn't you come up with me?"

"Up?" she said, as if the concept had never occurred to her. "Is there an 'up'? Up has no meaning to me." Her voice was the same, familiar and childlike and strange at once, the voice I'd heard whispering in my dreams, and I felt as if I'd never left her.

Her words made no sense, but then, nothing here made sense any more. "Leah says that your existence is impossible," I said.

"Leah," she said, musingly, as if the word had some secret meaning to her.

"You can't be here," I told her, fighting to get the words out before I forgot myself, before I was totally overcome by the incandescent heat of her presence. "You must be ..." I could hardly say it. "You are a figment of my imagination."

She reached out and brushed my cheek with one hand, her touch infinitely light, and smiled wistfully. "I am real, Davy. More real than you are, I think. Are you real? Or are you only an involuted dream?"

"The crash," I said. The whiskers of my cheek tingled in the exact shape of her fingertips. "Do you remember the crash? Do you remember coming here?"

"Crash?" she said, slowly, as if the thought had never occurred to her. "I don't remember a crash. I don't remember the past. Maybe there is no past. I remember only being here. And you. I remember you."

But that could be post-traumatic syndrome; crash survivors are usually disoriented, amnesiac; and to be stranded for years, far from humanity? What had that done to her? How could she be coherent? How could she be sane at all?

I reached out hesitantly and touched her shoulder. Even through the thin foil of her jumpsuit I could feel the heat of her body. She was

trembling slightly, or perhaps the trembling was in my hands. Of their own accord my fingertips began to stroke her. "Are you real?" I whispered. "How can you be real? How could you be here?" My body was thrumming, and a sensation of intense, almost unbearable sweetness seemed to suffuse through my body.

"I am real," she said, softly, as I helped her remove her jumpsuit and she, in turn, helped me out of the confining awkwardness of clothing.

I didn't think of Leah at all.

I DON'T KNOW HOW LONG I SPENT WITH HER, WHETHER IT WAS HOURS or days, making love, talking, gazing into her bottomless eyes and realizing that, for the first time in my life, I had found somebody who understood me and accepted me for everything I was, and for everything I would never be. Time had little enough meaning here. Hours or days, it was a long time later before I went outside the tiny shelter, and even then it was for the most mundane, the crudest possible reason. For all that we had shared every part of ourselves over and over again, I was still too shy to use a urine collection bag in front of her.

Leah stood there, waiting for me.

"It's time for us to leave," Leah said. Her voice was gentle, almost wistful. I had never heard her like that. "We have to leave now, Tinkerman."

And I saw Leah in a new light. She was older than I'd remembered. God, when had I last looked at her, really looked at her? Of course she was older; we both were. Her hands were too large, her eyes set too far apart. Her clothes were rumpled and stale, and her fingernails were ragged. How could I ever have been so obsessed with her? She was a human being. Only a human being: fallible, plain, slightly ridiculous. I had been a child when I'd thought I'd fallen in love with her; for all these years, I'd been chasing a child's dream.

"I'm not going back, Leah," I said. I hadn't realized that this was my intention, but the moment I said it, I knew it was true. I wasn't going back. "I've — I've found someone. I'm staying here."

"I know."

"You know?"

"God, how much I've learned! It's all here, Tinkerman, all encoded in the crystals. How much there is left to learn! I've learned unified field theories; physics for seven and ten dimensions. I don't know how useful it is; I don't know if any of it will have any use at all. I think that anything I can learn here might be only the physics of imaginary universes, impossible universes; of universes that might have been, or might yet be, or may only be dreamed of." She picked up a crystal and stared at it, unseeing. "Beautiful, and cold."

"I'm not going back, Leah," I said. "Tell the captain — hell, I don't know. You can tell him anything."

"There is no end to it," she said. "I could stay here forever, and forever keep on learning new things, forever moving deeper and deeper into the enigma." She dropped the crystal and sighed. "I can't force you, Tinkerman. It's time to go, past time, long past time. But I can't force you to come back. I can only ask."

She turned and walked away. Not once did she look back.

I went back into the shelter, and she was there, as incredibly lovely as ever, waiting. Her very perfection was almost unbearable. She was made for me; every curve, every microscopic cell of her perfectly suited for me. There was a question I had to ask, and I didn't know how to say it. "I love you," I said, finally. "Utterly. Helplessly. Why? How?"

"I know."

It wasn't an answer. I didn't know if I'd wanted an answer. "What are you? Are you even human?"

She tilted her head, and in the corners of her eyes was a faintest trace of a smile. "Can't you tell? Of course I'm human. I have to be. I am exactly as you want me to be."

"Then what are you?"

"I have never contemplated myself before." She hesitated for a moment, eyes half closed, thinking. "I am capable of neither love nor hate. I simply am what I am."

"You don't love me."

"If you think I love you, then I do."

"If I left?"

"I would be as I ever was, neither loving nor hating."

There is only one way to leave paradise, and that is to simply walk away. I knew that if I looked back, even for an instant, I would never be able to leave.

I kept walking.

THE TRANSFER VEHICLES SAT WHERE I HAD LEFT THEM, THREE STUMPY obelisks, gracelessly alien against the enigmatic landscape.

"You were looking for great scientific truths," I said to Leah, "and that is what you found."

"Yes."

I didn't dare say what I had found. It hurt too much. "And Tally?"

But I didn't really have to ask about Tally. I already knew. When we got to the surface, I had instantly seen that her t-vehicle, her only ride home, had been cannibalized. The spherical tank of atomic hydrogen was missing. It was the fuel for the lander; the most energetic form of chemical matter possible. It was also — if used wrong, if used without the nozzle, if used just as a defocused beam of invisible supersonic gas, by a person who knew just exactly what she was doing — a very dangerous weapon.

"Tally wanted a challenge," Leah said. "All her life, she has been seeking a worthy opponent, something tougher, smarter, and stronger than she was." Leah shook her head. She was silent for a while, and then, very softly, she said, "And you?"

I turned away and closed my eyes. She walked up behind me and put her hand on my shoulder, very gently, so softly that I perhaps only imagined it.

"I'm sorry."

I shook my head. "Let's get these vehicles off the ground."

We boosted the probe first, its robotic memory loaded with the message for *Orpheus* and a synchronized clock, to tell them exactly where and when we would make the rendezvous. The t-vehicles didn't have enough fuel to launch directly into orbit; we would boost and hover, trusting that *Eurydice* would be there for us. It was a dangerous way to make rendezvous; doubly dangerous when the communications link was so erratic. If we stayed, though, yes, if we stayed, that would be even more dangerous.

I put Sailor into my t-vehicle, setting him onto the instrument console. The instant before I sealed the cockpit, though, he darted free and fluttered away. There was no time to chase him; the rendezvous schedule was already established. In the distance, I caught a glimpse of something rising up to join him, a speckle of feathers, deep green with just a hint of blue. And then the count was zero.

Leah first, and I a fraction of a second later, we boosted out into the unknown, into hope and faith.

ON *ORPHEUS*, WAITING FOR US IN ORBIT, THE LANDING MISSION HAD been a short one, the total elapsed time only a few hours. The mission debriefing lasted nearly as long as the mission. Most of the questions were directed at Leah, questions on observations and scientific points. She seemed weary; her face drawn, her answers short and factual, completely free of any of the speculations she had confided in me during the mission. I didn't mention the survivor I'd found. How could I? How could I have explained my actions? They seemed bizarre, now, even to myself.

But I thought of her constantly.

Orpheus orbited slowly, ten million kilometers from the enigma, waiting for days for Tally to show up. She didn't.

"There is nothing more we need to do here," Captain Shen said. "On your evidence, I believe I have to declare crewman Okumba lost. It's time to go home."

It took another day to reconfigure *Orpheus* for boost, to run full-up checks on the navigation and control systems, ramp up the main fusion engines to standby power and check them out.

Later, when *Orpheus* had been configured for boost, preflight inspections completed and verified that all loose items were accounted for and stowed for resumption of gee, I had a sudden thought. The captain, as expedition leader, had the prerogative of assigning a name. I found Captain Shen.

"Enigma," the captain said, replying to my question. "Just Enigma." He must have seen my puzzlement. "I logged the name as Enigma, Mr. Tinkerman, so that we would make the crew's unofficial usage official."

I nodded. I'd just expected something classical, or maybe Dantean.



Shayol, perhaps, or Lethe, the shore from which no one returns. "Enigma it is, then."

I was on shift, second backup in the nav station. The 1-minute warning sounded, and I gazed out the viewport, searching for the enigma. I knew exactly where to look, and still I saw nothing, not even a twinkling of starlight, where the Enigma waited. Nothing. There was no reason at all why, when the boost came and the sudden heaviness of thrust-induced gravity weighed me into my couch, my eyes should be suddenly filled with tears.

"I'VE THOUGHT ABOUT IT," I SAID TO LEAH. WE WERE LYING SIDE BY SIDE in our bunk. "I don't understand it. I don't understand anything."

Although we weren't touching, I could feel her body, warm beside me. I hadn't touched her, hadn't made any advances, since that moment, long ago, when we'd gone to our separate transfer vehicles to drop from *Eurydice* into the unknown. It seemed like a lifetime to me. She was a human, only a human. And what human could ever compare with an ideal?

Across the tiny cubicle, fastened securely in place against the oppressive force of overgee, the statuette of an ascetic Buddha gazed up at something above my head with blank, enigmatic eyes.

"Tell me, what don't you understand?" Leah said.

I gestured, toward the back bulkhead, where — millions of kilometers behind us — the Enigma was. "That. What we saw, what we did. Everything."

"Ah. Information, Tinkerman. Pure, inchoate information. But

information without context, without intelligence — without humanity — is meaningless." Now she was talking softly, to herself. "I knew that. I did know that."

After a pause, she said, "Captain Shen will be sealing the records of the landing expedition. Officially, our little trip down never happened. The expedition report will say no definite surface was found, and Enigma will be listed as a danger to transit, with a keep-away zone established." She was silent for another long moment. "It has to be that way, Tinkerman, you know that." She seemed to be trying to convince me. "We're not ready. We don't know how to be gods."

I lay back, digesting the information. Gods? "That won't keep people away forever. We're curious. Besides, if the captain really wanted people to stay away, he should have named it something less mysterious than 'Enigma.' He should have named it something boring. He should have named it 'Smith.'"

Leah laughed gently. Her body radiated softly warm against my back.

"Someday people will come back," I said. "You can bet on it."

"I know," Leah said. "But there are a hundred thousand other things to investigate, out here in the great dark. Subjovians. Comets. Solitary planets. Some maybe even stranger than this. It will keep us away for a while. A hundred years, perhaps. Maybe more. And perhaps then, just perhaps, people will be wiser, more mature."

"I doubt it."

"I've convinced the old man it's dangerous, anyway. It's all I can do."

Gods? Had Leah really meant it, when she said that we could have been gods? And just what had she meant, when she said that information had to be shaped by intelligence? What exactly qualified as intelligence? Was, say, a bird sufficient intelligence? Could a cockatiel be a god? Could it become one, in a hundred years, or a thousand?

Some day people would return to the Enigma. I wondered what they would find.

What I did know was that, in the end, Leah had come for me, had come down deep into the Enigma, when she must have known that every meter she went deeper into the Enigma would make it harder for her to ever want to leave. She had come for me.

I don't like overgee. You have to think out every move slowly and carefully. It makes sex awkward, clumsy.

"You've changed, Tinkerman," Leah said.

"Yes," I hadn't realized it until she said it, but I had.

"You've grown, somehow." Her eyes were closed. "I think I like you better this way."

I closed my eyes, and instantly I could see another, a girl who'd never needed a name, who I'd known forever, since long before the world was formed. A child's dream, really. But we were all children, somewhere deep inside. Maybe even Leah.

I'd made my choice, and there is no use looking back. Far behind me, I could hear the throbbing of the pulsed fusion engine. I opened my eyes, and knew I was going home. □

Headlines

BY JANE YOLEN

UFO Captures Siamese Twins

We were two too often
to understand the alien one
until with a slice of light
we were apart,
four arms,
four legs,
two sides,
one heart.

Bigfoot Rapes Coed, She Has Son

He was big all over.
Even his hair
was big.
Even his heir
was big.

MARTIAN MEN EAT AT TALLAHASSEE DINER

They ordered eggs
sunny-side up.
When one yolk was broken
they all cried,

their tears silver
and solemn
as if one of their own
had died.

ASTRONAUTS FIND RACKS ON MOON

Two sets of prints,
as ambling
as one can get,
as if a lunar lady
was out walking her lunar
pet.
The pet, it must be noted,
had six feet.
The astronauts have a bet
as to which one is actually
the lady,
and which
the pet.

Spaceship Lands In London Zoo

It was at night.
Only the lemurs
and the large cats
noticed

and one zoo keeper
who mistook the alien
for a North American
skunk.
But then—
he was drunk.

Space Girls Night Out

Don't ask *me* why.
I am too exhausted to guess
why they chose Kansas.
They left the place a mess.

Crop Circles Alien Landing Fields

The wheat went first,
cycling down in a hurry;
corn went after.
It was when the rye
went all awry
that we had a real
disaster.

Aliens Astronauts Bring World Peace

If this were true,
don't you think we'd know?
CNN would already
have told us so.

THE... DEATH OF THE UNIVERSE

Continued from page 42

wanted. It would be so easy for the interrogator to influence the hearings. A down-vote, an immediate sterilization of Halian society, then dividing the new, clean world like a fresh-baked pie. None would dare oppose. And no one, least of all the ambassador himself, could question her assertion that she had established communication with the Halian envoy, had divined his secret knowledge of a Halian takeover plan. Or any other excuse to force the vote the way she wanted. Caitley had dug his own grave! Let Haliens sit behind their mirror — until she shattered it!

The memory reared up of that mysterious, shadowy fear implanted deep in John Edwards' subconscious, and Ket hesitated to consider it. She well knew how perceptive, keen, and trustworthy were instincts that sound such warnings in a person's heart. She decided not to disregard it. First she would uncover the exact cause of the Earther's paradoxical fear. Then get rid of the immediate competition. And Haliens had to be gotten rid of. Only another empath knew how important that was. Neither she nor the Coalition wanted any more interrogators, uncondemning or otherwise.

That's why they had sent the brain-dead ambassador! To pretend their decisions were being made by a mind which an interrogator could *not* manipulate. Psychological leverage against her, impressive to other members unable to screen their own cringing secrets. A splendid diversion tactic, Ket thought admiringly. Unexpected of pacifists.

She reached the Halian quarters. Her visitor-signal was answered immediately by the caretaker.

"Thank you for receiving me, Samel. May I speak with Ambassador Caitley?"

Samel's smile emblazoned his face. "Of course! We've been hoping to see you." As the Halian welcomed her in, she wondered if he were sensing her purpose. He could block, Ket knew. But so could she.

Caitley was stretched out on the bed, this time on his stomach. His eyes were closed. "I do not wish to disturb his sleep, Samel," she lied, carefully noting the control plate between gaunt shoulder blades.

Samel was already rousing the body. "He's not sleeping. I have the headband adjusted to keep the eyelids closed." The caretaker seemed eager to have someone even pretend to speak with Caitley himself. Interrogator Ket was also eager. The contest grew exhilarating. "When your eyes are closed the brain produces a lot of alpha waves," Samel explained. "It's restful."

Regal Ket seated herself while she watched the lifting, harnessing, buckling, reattaching to the chair. Samel guided it toward her. Slumped, no matter how artificially tensed the muscles or how tight the straps, staring — slow blink — at her midsection — slow blink — until she lifted the bridled chin. Even facing her, the lifeless eyes did not see her. We have the *right* to make war, she sent. Did it ever once cross your self-righteous minds that conflict might be a *necessity* for us? She let the head sag and turned to Samel.

"Samel, I wish to speak with the ambassador privately."

The caretaker looked back and forth between them. "Interrogator, are you sure?"

"I'll do the talking, of course. I merely want to explain the hearing situation again. So I'm convinced the ambassador understands procedures." She saw disbelief. Good; she hated dealing with complete fools. "Samel, do you understand what, exactly, my job is?"

He nodded. "Yes. The Earthers were very careful to explain the function of the interrogator. Very careful."

All right, we shall hope they warned you adequately. "Then you realize that I might be able to communicate with your ambassador where others cannot? You yourself once hinted that a strong empath such as myself might reach him."

After a long examination of the invalid — ending in that damnable smile — Samel nodded again. "I like to think he's been waiting for you, interrogator." He exited the quarters.

Regal Ket turned at once to Caitley and probed for that supraphysical entity residing within the tissue of brains. Nothing. Probed,

searched — was anybody in there? What in hell did the Earther sense? Nothing, nothing, nothing. Wait. Haliens must *embrace* to make the contact. The thought nauseated her. Had John Edwards made such incorporeal love to his adored Haliens? To Caitley? Was that when their secret had been exposed to his subconscious ward? She gave a final psychic sweep over what was once a whole being. The eyes, the head, the sprawled limbs, nothing more than a medical school's cloned training dummy. "I'm on to your game," Ket said. "I admire it. Infiltrate the Coalition worlds, put your 'mirrors' around them — that'd be the first step, right? Cage the lions. If you were in my place, you'd certainly pull it off. Nobody would catch on until too late. Even after six cycles of living with you, your own Earth envoy can't identify his fear of you." A foreboding, Regal Ket suspected, John Edwards would probably never consciously feel even after he, his people, the Coalition had been stripped of their weapons and their ability to hurt each other (or Haliens) and their worlds made into whatever padded cells the Haliens considered appropriate for madmen.

THE INTERROGATOR BEGAN THE SYSTEM- atic unbuckling, disconnecting, de- chairing she had carefully watched sev- eral times now. "What would you take

away from us first? Our tau rifles or our free will?" Released, the body fell forward against her. She held the shoulders to study the back plate controls. It would be best to try a very slight disruption of the autonomic nervous system so that, after sending Samel away on some fool's errand, Caitley died slowly over the next few days, rather than having him drop dead in her lap. Regal Ket didn't worry about consequences either way. She pushed the body upright. Getting rid of this garbage would be a relief all around — just as soon as she made one last effort to find Caitley, and whatever it is that frightens the Earther so subliminally. It was like the religious societies' inexplicable fear of their intangible God.

The staring eyes distracted her. Could she shut them? As she examined the headband, the body kept dropping forward against her; Regal Ket felt revulsion rising. Hell with it. She let the metal-ringed head fall on her shoulder and reached around the yielding, spindly shoulders to the back plate controls. Fingers eager to make the fatal adjustment

She was in the Halian's embrace. And then in his mind. Finally. Abruptly. Yanked in. Like a balky pet on a leash.

Regal Ket saw herself in a mirror. Her reflection, only not a reflection — a mirror, only not a mirror but the black dilated pupils of Tomisan Caitley's eyes. Focusing on her from the other side of the dimensional plane into which he was blasted by fire from an impulsive opton handgun. Then Regal Ket was the ghost from the other side, looking out through a voiceless invalid's eyes —

At herself.

She was leaning forward to buckle, connect, straighten a body that could not be felt beneath her. "I am glad that the interrogator does not feel loneliness," said her voice through the enveloping darkness. "I could not have condemned any other thus." The scene shifted. A hand lifted the head in which Regal Ket was imprisoned, re-aiming the too-dilated eyes until she now viewed her own face. Her own eyes. Tomisan Caitley's Halian soul within them.

"The interrogator will now be truly capable of interpreting the desires of the Fa Hali Ambassador." It was still her voice, but with a difference. Only Regal Ket would ever detect the new *evil* in it. The head was being strapped in place. A slow-blink momentarily closed off her view. "I shall use all my influence to see that Earth's request for full membership without restrictions be granted their protégé." The eyes opened; Regal Ket raged forever silent at the figure sitting before her.

Tomisan Caitley, the Haliens' first offensive weapon.

"We'll show you how to be *nice* people," he said, wrenching what had been her face into its first, hideous, smile. □



REMYOKAT

He was the King. He loved us tender. Yet in truth he was from a distant galaxy — address unknown.

THE BRIDE OF ELVIS

BY KATHLEEN ANN GOONAN
Illustration by Chuck Demorat

FINDING THE TOMB OF ELVIS EMPTY WAS A BIG SHOCK FOR DARLENE. She usually rose just before dawn, the nicest time of day here at Graceland, when it was all misty and as pretty as the Day of Instantaneous Redemption was going to be. But this particular Sunday, the hot sun coming in the nine-foot-high window hit Darlene square in the face as she lay dreaming of *mana*, white and lovely. She stirred, blinked, and then slipped back

into the dream, where she was a child again, eating as much *mana* as she could stuff down, while the others laughed at her greed and urged her on.

She rolled over and luxuriated atop the warmth of her round, leather-rimmed waterbed, resting her ear against the black satin sheet to hear the soothing slosh within.

Then she opened her eyes.

The readout on her alarm was blinking. Power must have gone out. Either that or she had messed it up again. Shoot. It was probably after eight, and Lu Ellen would have gone off-shift at seven.

So?

It was Sunday. Darlene went limp again. A slow day. Graceland wouldn't open until 9:30. She had plenty of time to check Elvis' readouts, and she had given Ella Mae in the Gift Shop a stockpile of hair snippings and skin scrapings, all ready in their little plastic twist-boxes (Ella Mae couldn't accuse her

of being lazy *this* time and leaving all the work for someone else), so she wouldn't have to fool with *that* this morning.

But after five more minutes of sloth, she heaved herself out of bed, put on her plastic cap and showered, then sat down at her white French Provincial dressing table.

She pulled big rollers out of her long, honey-colored hair and put on foundation, cool and smooth against her skin, powder, and red lipstick. She touched on the comp-sphere, and the Hearings began to play.

*The King, the King
Will rise again
Through air of gold and fire.*

HER FAVORITE. SHE HUMMED ALONG WITH THE ETHEREAL VOICES of the Elvis Choir, then it got into the Prophecies, about the ship coming back with plenteous *mana* for all.

Well, of course she was one weakness — they needed to substances produced

As Darlene listened, she put on her eye makeup, which she especially loved. Mermaid Green eyeshadow, with little sparkles in it, right after the black eyeliner. She shopped at the Rex-Mart down on Magnolia. That was the only place she could find Mermaid Green.

Fake eyelashes and lots of thick, black mascara. There. When the daily Prophecy was over, she turned on the radio and looked in the closet.

"Love me tender, love me true, never let me go," The King sang via KYNG, right across the river.

You bet, honey. Oh, you bet.

As she buttoned her lace blouse, a public service message urged the latest solution to help everyone stay prepared for the Great Return in case it took much longer, head-freezing. For the ones who didn't want to put up with any more bull while they waited. Elizabeth Taylor was going to do it, apparently, and some other humans, like Timothy Leary and Michael Jackson.

Darlene laughed out loud when she heard that, but it was really kind of sad. There was always that seepage between them and humans, but head-freezing wouldn't *work* for humans, of course. Tiny, but crucial, things about their physiology were entirely different; they couldn't regenerate. Not to mention that their technology was so primitive.

She gave her curls a final, swift brush and fastened back one side of her hair with a rhinestone barrette that spelled out ELVIS.

She felt a bit haughty as she left her room in the Bride's Hall. If you didn't have the Lineage, you had nothing. And she had it. In spades. It was one reason she was a Bride.

In the kitchen, which was empty, she fixed herself some instant coffee, all she liked in the morning unless she was a tad hungry, and then she had ten or eleven microwave sausage biscuits. The four other Brides were still asleep, of course, but there were usually some snotty Techs running around in their slick gray suits and belts jammed with all kinds of what-not and gadgets. They thought they were so great. They didn't realize that without the Brides, the race just couldn't continue. Rita in particular was a jerk. She always got on Darlene's nerves, stepping aside and bowing when she went by, saying, "Make way, everyone, wow, it's a *Bride*."

Darlene lit her first Marlboro of the day and opened the cooler door to get a fresh sheaf of gladiola to put in the vases around Elvis' pedestal. The thick, dark green stalks were cool in her hand. She slipped her feet into the white satin heels she'd carried with her, opened the back door, and walked down the path to the Tomb.

The small pavilion that held Elvis was in the Meditation Garden. She reflected, as usual, as she passed the perfectly manicured trees that lined the path, on how fortunate she was to be a Bride. That, along with the Hearings, always got her in the proper frame of mind for putting up with all the fat, sweating mutants (and some thin, pretty ones too, now, Darlene, don't be evil) for the next eight hours.

It was always comforting to see Him there, all ready for the coming Redemption. He'd been put in a plexiglass pyramid showcase years ago, once they realized that the Redemption might take longer than they thought. That was the best way, the Committee had decided, to keep control of everything. A bunch of rabble-rousers

who called themselves the Band of the King were always demanding more access, but they were just ineffective young upstarts for the most part, jealous because the Lineage of many of the members was human-tinged, though they weren't full-blown mutants. Ugly folks, ugly in the way they acted. Darlene shivered.

Calmed by the spring flowers that flanked the pavilion, Darlene saw that the sky was becoming overcast. The sun was hidden now, and the air smelled like rain. She climbed the five low marble steps up to the stone door, which was inscribed with angels and guitars. She raised her wrist to scan the door open, stopped. Her arm hung in the air.

The door was already open, just an inch. Her breath stuck in her throat; she stood on the threshold as fear flooded through her. The lights weren't working; she fumbled around on the wall next to the door and got the backup panel open, found the light button and flicked it with her long fingernail.

The plexiglass lid was propped open. Someone, *someone* with access...Darlene began to shake. The fat old guy just *wasn't there*. Lead wires dangled over the guitar-embossed pedestal.

H

ER CIGARETTE FELL FROM HER fingers and smoldered on the pink shag rug. Maybe, she told Kcell later, when she had to explain, she felt that it was her fault and that all their plans and dreams were ruined, blasted by the indigent idiots on this backward planet they had to live on. Mingled in the back of her mind were the threats of the Band of the King. They kept saying they had to take mat-

ters into their own hands if anyone ever wanted to see the ship again—that is, they said, if such a ship even existed. Some of them, backsliders, were idiots enough to doubt.

Struck by waves of anxiety, she didn't stop to think that security was the Tech's job, or about *anything*, except that the other Brides would have *her* head as soon as they saw this, and if they froze it, they'd do it in a way so that she couldn't regenerate.

All her fear soul rose up through her throat, white-hot, as pure as a Gospel wail. "He's gone. He's *gone*!"

She ran right out through the Music Gate, using her wrist scanner to open it without thinking twice. Didn't care who was looking. Panicked. She ran right out onto Elvis Presley Boulevard, screaming her fool head off.

And met Roy.

He pulled up in front of her at the stoplight in a battered white F-100 Ford pickup with double back wheels and a custom extra-long bed. She was breathing hard and letting out a little sob at the end of each breath and knew, in the back of her mind, that she was quite a sight in her silver miniskirt, lacy blouse, and white satin heels, still holding the glads in her left hand.

ravenous. It was their eat, a lot; they needed these by Earth to survive.

She stared right through the window at the kind-faced man, who was handsome too, let's not mince words here, with keen blue eyes, black hair, and a short, black beard. His wide shoulders were hunched over the wheel, and his long lanky arms stopped while reaching up for the column shift as he stared right back at her. He leaned over and opened the door. "Get in, little lady, get right on in here."

Darlene didn't think twice. She got right in there and started bawling, hard. He reached across her and then had to slide right next to her to reach the door and close it since she was holding on tight to that bouquet with both hands now, worried about Mars, her talking cat, not having had any breakfast at all, not any, then remembering that the bag of pellets was open behind the kitchen door.

The light changed, and he ground the gears, apparently not concerned about his transmission, and whatever he had in the back of the truck crashed against the tailgate.

"Jason took my tie-down, the little creep. Wait till I get my hands on him, I'll warm his fanny good. His mom lets him do whatever he wants. I'm just the mean daddy." He sighed, and his eyes, when he looked at Darlene, were sad and lost. "He stays mostly with her anyway."

Darlene was still crying some, just little snorts and a few tears. He leaned down and fished under the seat and came up with an old wrecked box of Kleenex. He pulled one out and handed it to her. "Here," he said. "Blow hard."

She put the flowers up on the dash and blew hard, not feeling at all embarrassed.

"Now, I want you to tell me what this here is all about," he said. "Have a fight with your boyfriend?"

"No," she gasped, so upset that she didn't even think twice about what to say. "It's Elvis. He's gone!" And she started to cry again, even harder. They'd waited for so long, and now that He was gone, no one would ever return, and they would never get home again. The ship wouldn't have any reason to come back for them. Stuck on this King-forsaken planet through all millennia. And no more kiddies either! They couldn't have kiddies without Him! Those little twist-boxes of hair clippings would be used up real fast. She started to cry again. It was too awful. Darlene had never felt so rattled in all her born days, not even when she had had to leave her kiddies behind to take up her duties as a Bride.

"Oh," he said. "I see." But she could tell by the set of his jaw and the crinkle beneath his eye that he didn't see, not at all, and she was enraged that she'd told all this to a stranger, a *human*, who would only laugh at her.

But he didn't. He just drove through the empty downtown Memphis blocks, past the Peabody, through the ramshackle part of town with its run-down blues dives, until they got to the river.

"Maybe it would calm you down some to go for a little ride. Sometimes that's the best thing to do, it's real soothing, you know, especially after we get out into the country. I live over in Arkansas. It's right pretty over there, and the apple blossoms are all out. Well, you might not want to go anywhere with me —" he looked at her and she stared back — "I might as well tell you I got real drunk last night and pretty much passed out here in the front seat. But there's no reason to hold that against me. Sometimes a person has to have a drink or two."

She didn't say anything while they crossed the gray Mississippi beneath the darkening sky, thinking furiously. What the hell was going on? Why was He gone? Why hadn't the security system worked? Because of the power failure, probably, the one that put her alarm clock on the blink. That Tech Rita, strutting around in her militaristic gear. She'd like it if Darlene was blamed, wouldn't she? Wouldn't be too hard to keep her from waking up on time. Maybe she was in cahoots with the Band of the King.

Yeah, sure. But what about the backup system?

She'd almost forgotten where she was when he said, "Well, really, I could use some breakfast, couldn't you? You sure look like you could."

He pulled into a little place that advertised "Home Cooking" and helped her jump down from the seat. The truck cab was pretty high off the ground, not like her low, sleek, red 'Vette with the plate that read *Bride 1*.

She followed him inside, drained and tired. Well, of course she was ravenous. It was their one weakness — they needed to eat, and a lot; they needed these substances produced by Earth to survive. Not as good as *mana*, not nearly as powerful or longevity-producing, but they could get by if they got enough. That's why they hit the grocery stores so often. Two, three times a day, full carts each time. Too many of them to feed on the ship after the drive went bad, not enough energy to run the ship and make *mana* too. A skeleton crew had gone on. They'd be back. Someday. Or maybe never, now, because of her. Because of her failure.

They had discovered that they couldn't all live together here, though — they simply ate too much. At least four times as much as humans, so they spread out over a couple of states so as not to attract notice.

They kept in touch at the grocery stores, of course. Those aisles were their domain, the sound of rattling grocery carts as familiar as breathing, the memorized foodgrids of a dozen big grocery chains each one knew like the back of her hand. A lot of them doubted whether the fleet would come back for them, but Darlene had never wavered in her faith. Until today.

SHE'D NEVER TRUSTED THE TECHS, WITH all their fancy gear and snotty ways. She once even requested a few pit bulls to stand guard. That point in her favor was on the record. A pretty slim defense, now that the worst had happened. "You have no *idea*," she had told the Committee, her days full of sobbing women flinging themselves against the velvet rope, smearing lipstick on the pyramid. But they weren't the real problem. Earth was such an odd place, full of criminals and just pure *weirdness*, you never knew what might happen, and now the worst, the absolute worst had happened. There were plenty of people who'd like to get hold of Elvis. But without Techs, he wouldn't last long.

She slid into the booth still trying to figure things out. She stared

She knew something distant galaxy she barely heard His voice. Cold

out the window while the black-haired man ordered coffee and hash browns and ham and biscuits and gravy and cheese omelets and grits for both of them just as if he knew, although she could see at a glance that he couldn't and that he was just a normal old human. But a good one, she saw that too. She wouldn't have even gotten into his truck if she hadn't been able to see that, but she didn't even have to think about those sorts of things because humans were really such simple beings. She kind of liked them, they made things so homey. They knew how to live — except that they scarcely lived longer than an insect. Hardly a tragedy, as far as she was concerned.

Still, sometimes she got tired of being a Bride and wanted to just be a human, instead of taking care of Elvis and longing for her kiddies. She'd had two before she was eleven, the process triggered by the sweat on the scarf she'd grabbed at her first concert.

Elvis had thrown it right at her. God, how lucky she'd been! Chosen! If the ship ever did come back, she was first in line for Elvis. She'd been activated at just the right age; she was one of the few who could actually mate with Elvis and conceive another King.

But it wasn't all fun. She'd had to leave those cute kiddies with her mother in order to be a Bride. That was hard. Being a Bride wasn't all it was cut out to be — checking all those meters and charts every day, letting them know if something was just a hair off so's the Techs could rush over and make a big deal out of it and blame it on the Bride in charge. Techs didn't think much of Brides, that was for sure. And now He was gone, and it was all her fault!

Or if it wasn't, best to hide out till they figured out whose fault it really was. She shivered to think how mean the other Brides would be when they found the King gone. It was pretty much like murder, or maybe killing somebody with a runaway car, because they wouldn't live much longer without him. Maybe not even a full human lifespan, puny as that was. Shit.

T

HE MAN WAS WATCHING HER. HE smiled. "You know, I'm not making fun of you or anything, but you sure look silly with all that stuff running down your face. Whenever we cried, Ma used to make us look in the mirror and see how funny we looked. 'See that monkey?' she'd say, and by God if that wouldn't make you laugh out loud to see your own red little face all screwed up —"

Shut up, she felt like saying. What do you know? but instead slid out of the seat.

"Wait," he said, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean —"

She let the door of the ladies' room whoosh shut behind her and leaned with straight elbows on the white, scummy sink.

He was right. She *did* look funny. Like a clown that had been caught out in the rain. Green stuff dribbled from the corner of one eye down onto her cheek, and there was a big black smear across her nose. And as for her mouth...

She leaned over and splashed her face with water. It took soap to

get it all off, and then her face felt stiff and dry without her Rose-Soft Moisturizer, and she didn't even have her emergency touch-up kit because she didn't have her purse with her. Her purse held not only her makeup but her bracelet, the bracelet that shielded them from the human pheromones which the males gave off when they had sex, pheromones powerful enough to trigger conception. The conception of mutants, that is. "Never go out without your bracelet," she could almost hear her mother warning. She never had. She'd never done *anything* like she'd done today.

She lifted her chin. The hell with them. She'd done her best. It *wasn't* her fault that He was gone, even though they'd blame it on her. Who cared? They'd be looking for her, but they'd never find her. She'd bury herself in this Kingforsaken country and she wouldn't go back, that's all. She just wouldn't. Not till she was good and ready. Maybe never.

She went back out and the plate of steaming food was there.

She slid into the booth. The ham was good and salty, real country stuff; she wondered where they got it. The omelet was plasticky but not bad, and the biscuits dripped with gravy full of cracklins. She shoved food in her mouth just about as fast as she could get it on the fork, elbows wide on the formica table, not caring if he stared at her, and he did.

"I never seen a lady eat so fast — now wait, sorry, I just seem to say the wrong thing, but it's true."

He offered her one of his Marlboros as they talked over coffee.

"So what was that you were saying now?" he asked. "Elvis is gone? Something about you being a bride?"

"Yeah, well, a Bride is just a caretaker, that's what we call ourselves, see? The estate hired us to take care of the shrine there, that's all. You know how many people come visit that?" Millions, and there was a damned good reason too.

"Even my ma has been," he said.

"What's your name?"

"Elroy. Elroy Juster. I live over in Sudden. That's a little town not too far away." He rose up out of the booth a little and reached over and lit her second cigarette.

His face was close to hers for a moment. She liked the way he smelled. His eyes were blue.

Intensely blue.

As she looked into them, she saw that he was very kind, with a degree of kindness she'd rarely sensed before. She never had spent much time with humans. She'd better get used to them now.

"What do you do for a living, Mr. Juster?"

"Call me Roy," he said, and frowned a little, and she liked the fleeting crease between his eyes. Some of these humans could be mighty attractive, and he was one of them for sure. Too bad, she thought, she'd left her purse behind. She wondered how he looked naked, how that long, lean body would feel next to hers, what those nice, big hands would do — oh hell, Darlene. You know that's dumb. You ought to be ashamed of yourself. Get some nose plugs or something. You don't want to tie yourself down with mutants.

"Just any little thing I can. My daddy raised tobacco, but it killed him. I mean, he smoked too damn much. Ma's mighty sick now from something or other. Pulmonary something or other, the doctor said.

showed in her eyes, a remembered, only when she sleep had blanked it out.

She'd like you, I know; she likes a girl that knows how to eat. She could cook up a meal in her day, and that's for sure." Well, that sounded attractive to Darlene. She was getting hungry again already.

But she felt sad, for a minute, listening to all that. There just wasn't any rest anywhere in the universe, that was all there was to it. You would think that these simple creatures would be able to have a nice life, but no, sireebob, they had their troubles too, just as bad troubles as if you had to keep the King ready for the Redemption. Thinking of the King reminded her that they'd have to go clear to another galaxy to get another King, and really, it was too late for that...she rested her forehead in her hands. They were shaking.

Roy reached over, pried one of her hands loose, squeezed it, held it until it stopped shaking, then let go. "I hope you don't mind, I mean it won't affect my driving none or anything," he said, "but I have this horrible headache and it might help if I had a beer..."

"No, that's OK. I'll have one too."

"Can't serve it before noon on Sunday," said the waitress.

Roy got out two dollars. "Only twenty minutes. This change the little hand on the clock any?" he asked.

"You're gonna make us lose our license," she said, but brought them both draft Buds.

The beer tasted good and tingly to Darlene. She didn't drink much but sometimes she really tied one on. It was starting to rain outside and everything was dark and cozy inside. It wouldn't be a bad day for that sort of thing, she thought. Sometimes it was all you could do, to keep from thinking about things.

"You know, I always wondered what this Elvis attraction was," he said. "Now don't get all huffy, I don't mean to hurt your feelings or nothing, but really, what do all these people see in Elvis?"

"Well, he's the King," she said, well into her third beer, which had just about completely obliterated her concern about what the other Brides might do to her. She felt kind of whoozy.

"So what?" he said. "He sang a few songs, he got fat, he died."

"Those weren't just any old songs," she flared. "Those were —" then she stopped. She'd said too much already, way too much.

"You know, you sure are a funny lady," he said. "They must pay you pretty good to be one of those Brides. I never heard of such a thing, really. I had no idea. I guess I just never paid much attention to Elvis, that's all. You're cute, though."

She was more than cute, she knew. She was gorgeous. They all were, with that long-legged, slim-hipped, big-breasted Southern style. Most of them favored white-blond hair and spoke in that exaggerated accent that rolled off the tongue so smooth and full. They matured fast, but didn't start looking old for a long, long time. Not unless they wanted too, but a lot of them did. It kept the men away. Between shopping, cooking, and eating, they mostly watched TV and kept up with things through their supermarket newspapers and KYNG. It made the time pass.

But she wasn't ready to look old yet. Roy was mighty attractive, she thought for about the tenth time. And very sweet, too. Damn it!

She had to pee. She walked toward the bathroom, then paused at the end of the lunch counter.

A little black and white portable flickered at the end of the lunch

counter, and she heard the word Elvis. An earnest reporter stood in front of Graceland with a microphone in her hand.

"Not only has Elvis disappeared, but his caretaker along with him. Police suspect foul play. There's been a massive power outage at Graceland and the surrounding area which a spokesman for the power company says can't be traced to any known reason."

Idiots. Next thing you know they'd be flashing her picture around the state. If the other Brides got hold of her, they'd tear her hair out by the roots. She turned around, went back to Roy, and leaned on the table. "I'm about ready to go," she said. "Are you?"

He smiled, and she was drawn into those blue eyes. He pushed himself out of the booth. She swayed, and he caught her arm. Had she only had three beers?

T

HEY WALKED OUT TO THE TRUCK through a light rain which patterned the brown puddles in the parking lot, and she could *feel* him walking next to her, almost as if he were some sort of twin she ought to return with to whatever it was happened before you were born. Though it was only a little bit after noon, they both looked together at the flashing motel sign the next parking lot over. A semi hissed by on its way down to the river.

They stood there for a moment, and he looked helpless as he gazed at her. Then, before she could say a word, the hell with her purse and the bracelet inside, the hell with her Mission and being a Bride (but the King was gone anyway, nobody needed Brides now), he reached across her and unlocked the door, stammered "Sorry" when his arm brushed against her breast, as she'd intended, and hurried around to his side of the truck.

"Didn't mean to leave you standing in the rain like that," he said, and started up the truck and flipped on the heater. "It'll be cold for a few minutes," he said, and took off down the road.

She felt pretty much on edge. She turned on the radio, which crackled with distant lightning.

"I get so lonesome when you're gone," He crooned, and she whispered, "Elvis."

"Now don't you go all dreamy-faced and eyes-rolled-up on me," he joked, stealing a glance at her. As he looked at her, his smile froze.

She knew something showed in her eyes, then, a distant galaxy she barely remembered, and then only when she heard His voice. Cold-sleep had blanked it out. She'd been just a kiddie. She blanked it out some more; she blinked, then laughed.

"I'm OK," she said.

"You look pale," he said, and rubbed her arm with the back of his hand. Then he pulled off the road in a flail of flying gravel and grabbed both her shoulders.

"Shit," he said, as the truck began to move. He let go of her and set the brake. Then he was kissing her, she was kissing him, O God, O, Elvis...

“There seems to be some from the sky,” the commentator Darlene jumped up and stared

“No,” he said and pulled back. “I don’t know why I’m doing this. I’ve never done anything like this before, believe me. Well, not quite. Like this. What I mean —”

So what? But it seemed important to him for some reason. “I believe you,” she said, which was what he wanted to hear, and she did, she knew this man inside out. She could. She just never bothered. Humans were usually so boring, especially the men who came on to her in the bars of Memphis.

She drew back and looked at Roy for a moment. She was breathing real fast and her chest felt funny.

He was full of beautiful resonance, with avenues of thought and being and pure kindness and innocence she could almost see down and touch, they were so real to her. Maybe she’d just never taken the time to look at a human before. Was this what Elvis was singing about in all those songs? Good god, what a feeling! No wonder Kings acted so nutty. They just lost their fool minds. She felt like singing herself. The hell with being a Bride. The ship would never be back.

She knew that lots had fallen by the wayside, forgotten their bracelets in a moment like this with no part of the King around, no sweat-soaked scarf, no little plastic twist-box of cells or hair to align the gene sequences correctly. What got born three months later were mutant half-human kiddies. Human birth control didn’t work for them because it was the pheromones that allowed the sperm and eggs already in them to join. The powerful spray of pheromones human males gave off during lovemaking did that too, but things got just a little twisted with those alien pheromones.

THOSE MUTANTS, AND SHE MIGHT CONCEIVE one any minute, if she kept on like this, were the thousands of women — always women — with sad, yearning faces who trudged past the coffin, not quite sure why they felt so strongly about Elvis. They were good for the budget, though, and it took a heck of a big bankroll to fund the checks that got sent out every two weeks so that everyone could get enough to eat. The full-lined ones matured quickly, almost twice as fast as humans, so

there were a few generations now, and where they came from was dim legend to new kiddies. She had her mother to thank for being so strict and making sure she listened every morning and kept the faith, though sometimes she had her doubts too. She’d been lucky to be a Bride, which kept it all fresh and real in her mind.

And now all hell had broken loose, and she wanted to stay with this human man. “Roy,” she whispered, and he drew her close against his chest. All her yearning loneliness was gone. She’d never have a man on the ship, except that one strictly delineated time. They were simply obsolete. All but one. There was always one King. But this particular King had gotten much too rowdy toward the end, what with a whole weird alien planet spread out before Him. Best to keep Him in coldsleep, all His vital parts preserved, all the necessary genetic

information still intact, before He ruined it altogether with his silly drugs and wild ways. Just a big kid, but Kings always were. Spoiled and rebellious. Never listening.

Darlene looked into Roy’s eyes. This guy was different. Maybe the human way *was* better.

She kissed Roy back. She opened her mouth and drew in his tongue, felt his breath become deep and slow as hers. His lips were soft on her face, his hands felt so good on her breast, on her thigh —

Afterward, without saying anything, he turned on the truck and drove as if he were in kind of a daze. She buttoned her blouse, bent down to snag her panties from off the floor and pulled them back on.

Finally, he said, “Damn.” But that was all he said.

She didn’t feel much like talking either. She could feel the conception within her body, just like she had when she’d grabbed His scarf, and it didn’t feel horrible like they said it would. Her mother had told her how creepy it would feel, how sickening and awful when the mutation was taking place.

It felt good.

It only took another forty-five minutes to get there. They drove past fields fringed over with new green growth, through a little town which had an old wooden grocery store with a faded red Coca-Cola sign. “Closed on Sunday,” the sign on the door said. A few pickups were parked next door at the Bar and Grill, and a black dog lay under one of them, trying to stay out of the rain. The courthouse was the nicest building in town, which was only two blocks long, with its dome and pillars.

“This is Sudden,” Roy said. “It’s the county seat.” He turned just past the courthouse onto a narrow asphalt road which changed to dirt after a few miles and climbed the narrow rim of a red clay hillside. At the top was a doublewide with a screened-in porch and rose bushes blooming all around, pink, red, yellow. A black satellite dish was right next to it. “It’s not much, I guess,” Roy said.

It’s not, she thought, but said, “It’s nice.”

“This is Ma’s,” he said. “That cabin over there is mine. I built it from a kit.”

“Really,” she said.

She looked all around, at the low green hills below them, the fields laid out so sure and true, with all those neighbors down little back roads. She felt good here, more at home than at Graceland, watching those meters, seeing that throng of sightseers file by, putting up with the jealousy of the other Brides because she was first in line once they got back to the ship, and they were just backups. Hell. It was all a stupid fantasy. Why not stay here? It seemed like home, and Roy felt like home too. She could have a future here. Not forever, or even close. But no one would have forever, now that the King was gone.

Roy took her hand, as if he knew what she was thinking. They got close to the doublewide and heard the drone of the TV.

“Good,” he said, and she felt his relief run up her spine and spread out through her body like a cool breeze. “I guess she’s OK. I shouldn’t have left her alone all night; you just never know.”

He knocked, then opened the door. “Ma,” he said, “how you doing? I brought somebody I want you to meet. Darlene, this is Zinne, my mother.”

He stopped so suddenly that Darlene ran right into the back of him.

thing white coming down said, his voice choked with fear. at the television. “Of course...”

“What’s wrong?” Roy asked his mother. Darlene looked around and saw an old lady dressed in a faded print dress. She was crying.

“Look,” she said.

Darlene looked, and her mouth fell open.

There it was, right on the Cable News Network: Graceland, from the air. About a million people were there, under the helicopter’s whup whup whup, as the reporter said, “It’s unbelievable, just unbelievable.”

“What happened?” Darlene asked, but she didn’t really have to. Of course it was on national news.

The old woman had a pale, sweet face. Darlene knew she used to be fat and full of piss and vinegar. She knew lots of things. She knew Roy’s mother was seventy-one, and had arthritis, adult-onset diabetes, and plaque in her left anterior descending coronary artery. Not to mention pulmonary lesions.

“If it don’t beat all,” Zinnea said. “I mean, that I’ve lived to see the day. Elvis is gone. Simply gone from his tomb, you know. Just look at that crowd.”

“Darlene here is one of the —” but Darlene kicked him sharp behind his knee and he shut up. She’d been a fool to tell him a thing. She was just a pure and entire fool anyway. She’d really have to play things down if she wanted to stay around here.

Roy touched her arm, and that *something* flooded through her. Maybe she wasn’t entirely a fool. It all made sense when he touched her, anyway.

Darlene sat down on the worn green couch next to Zinnea and took her hand. “You kinda liked Elvis, huh?”

“Oh, I cut my teeth on that man,” she said, and she wheezed as she spoke. “Why, you know, I even saw him once, it was at the County Fair back in the ’50s when he was just getting started. Roy’s father had a hissy fit about it; said I shouldn’t be so interested in how the hips of any other man moved. But there was a lot of goodness in him.”

“There was,” said Darlene. And some mighty strange DNA too, lady. Still holding the old lady’s hand in both of hers, she looked into her frail face. She could feel Roy sitting on her other side, knew his eyes were glued to the TV.

Darlene didn’t do this much because, frankly, she didn’t often care enough to do it.

But it was just a matter of restoring a balance, and then removing that plaque from the left ventricle. Darlene healed her, then let go of her hand.

Zinnea looked at her with an open, innocent look, as if she were a kiddie herself, just born. Her cheeks grew pink. She leaned back against the couch, coughed once, then breathed deeply with wonder on her face. She squinted at Darlene. “I *do* feel good, all of a sudden.” She stood up. “Real good. I must have forgot my manners. Let me get you some ice tea. Lemon or sugar, honey?”

“Both,” said Darlene, and wondered if maybe Zinnea had a few pies stored away that she could polish off as a little snack.

“It will take me a few minutes,” Zinnea said. “None of that instant stuff around here.” She went around a paneled partition.

“There seems to be something white coming down from the sky,” said the commentator, his voice choked with fear.

Darlene jumped up and stared at the television. “Of course,” she

said. “Of course.”

They’d finally got the drive working again. Took them long enough. Only about sixty years. Naturally they’d take the King first — they had to hook Him in. They’d taken no chances with Him. Why tell the Brides? Those Techs always treated Brides like dirt and were so smug about their jobs and always saying nothing could go on without them. They must have just planned to wake the Brides up when everything was ready, to keep them from getting underfoot. She thought of her kiddies, suddenly, her beautiful, fast-growing full-lined kiddies. They must be here, along with her mother. There were no men, of course, in that heaving, thronging crowd.

“I have to get back to Memphis, Roy,” she said.

“No,” he whispered, and she felt his pain. He jumped up and his arms went around her, held her tight. “I won’t let you go. So what if He’s back? They don’t need you there. I *do*. Oh God, honey, sweet-heart, I *do*.”

Her eyes filled with tears when she heard the passion in his voice, which matched hers in strength and depth.

Then Elvis, *live*, she knew it, launched into a song she’d never heard before. It must be patched through from the ship. The *call*. What they’d always been waiting for.

It was like she was hearing two things when she listened, the human words, and beneath them, ancient, powerful directions.

T

HE SPARK OF THE UNKNOWN PAST surged through her. *Mana*, pure white as if distilled from starlight. Long, incredibly long life; planets beyond her ken, a homeland she couldn’t even imagine, but which pulled at every cell.

Roy never looked frightened, no, not for an instant, as he reached back to turn off the TV, almost like he knew it all and what was going to happen.

“I won’t let you go,” he said. He held her even more closely, and she knew it was true. She drew back a little and just looked at him, with Elvis’ lovely voice in her ears, and he started to gasp. He let go of her. His hands went to his throat, and he fell to the floor, writhing and choking.

Darlene reached down and picked up the keys he’d dropped, then stepped over him.

Elvis stopped singing as she walked out the door. She walked across the gravel lot, climbed into the truck, and heard Zinnea scream.

“Sorry, honey,” she said, as she turned the ignition key and slammed the truck into reverse, even though she knew he couldn’t hear her. But he’d be breathing again now. She’d only meant to make him let go of her. As she sped down the driveway, toward Him, *mana*, her kiddies, the ship, *everything*, she whispered, blinking back tears, “It never would have worked. It *never* would have worked anyway, Roy, sweetie. Never.” □



The science fiction novels of Jules Verne were merely works of the imagination ... or were they something more?

BY STEPHEN BAXTER
Illustrated by Ken Tunell

THE INITIAL DETONATION was the most severe. I was pushed into my couch by a recoil that felt as if it should splay apart my ribs. The noise was extraordinary, and the projectile rattled so vigorously that my head was thrown from side to side. And then followed, in perfect sequence, the subsidiary detonations of those smaller masses of gun-cotton lodged in the walls of the cannon. One after another these barrel-sized charges played vapor against the base of the projectile, accelerating it further, and the recoil pressed with ever-increasing force.

I fear that my consciousness departed from me, for some unmeasured interval.

When I came to, the noise and oscillation had gone. My head swam, as if I had imbibed heavily of Ardan's wine butts, and my lungs ached as they pulled at the air.

But, when I pushed at the couch under me, I drifted slowly upward, as if I were buoyant in some fluid that had flooded the projectile.

I was exultant. Once again my Columbiad had not failed me!

My name is Impey Barbicane, and what follows — if there are ears to hear — is an account of my second venture beyond the limits of the terrestrial atmosphere: that is, the first voyage to Mars.

MY LUNAR ROMANCE RECEIVED FAVORABLE REVIEWS ON its London publication by G. Newnes, and I was pleased to place it with an American publisher and in the Colonies. Sales were depressed, however, due to unrest over the war with the Boers. And there was that little business of the protests by M. Verne at the 'unscientific' nature of my device of gravitational opacity; but I was able to point to flaws in Verne's work, and to the verification of certain aspects of my book by experts in astronomy, astronomical physics, and the like.

All of this engaged little of my attention, however. With the birth of Gip, and the publication of my series of futurological predictions in *The Fortnightly Review*, I had matters of a more personal nature to attend to, as well as of greater global significance.

I was done with interplanetary travel!

It was with surprise and some annoyance, therefore, that I found myself the recipient, via Newnes, of a series of missives from Paris, penned — in an undisciplined hand — by one Michel Ardan. This evident eccentric expressed admiration for my work and begged me to place close attention to the material he enclosed, which I should find "of the most extraordi-

nary interest and confluence with [my] own writings."

As is my custom, I had little hesitation in disposing of this correspondence without troubling to read it fully.

But M. Ardan continued to pepper me with further fat volleys of paper.

At last, in an idle hour, while Jane nursed Gip upstairs, I leafed through Ardan's dense pages. And I have to confess that I found my imagination — or the juvenile underside of it! — pricked.

Ardan's enclosure purported to be a record made by a Colonel Maston, of Baltimore in the United States, over the years 1872 to 1873 — that is, some twenty-eight years ago. This Maston, now dead, claimed to have built an apparatus that had detected "propagating electro-magnetic emissions": a phenomenon first described by James Clerk Maxwell, and related, apparently, to the more recent wireless-telegraphy demonstrations of Marconi. If this were not enough, Maston also claimed that the "emissions" were in fact signals, encoded after the fashion of a telegraph message.

And these signals — said Maston and Ardan — had emanated from a source *beyond the terrestrial atmosphere*: from a space voyager, en route to Mars!

When I got the gist of this, I laughed out loud. I dashed off a quick note instructing Newnes not to pass on to me any further communications from the same source.

FIFTH DAY. TWO HUNDRED AND NINETY-SEVEN THOUSAND LEAGUES.

Through my lenticular glass scuttles, the Earth now appears about the size of a full Moon. Only the right half of the terrestrial globe is illuminated by the Sun. I can still discern clouds, and the differentiation of ocean blue from the land's brown, and the glare of ice at the poles.

Some distance from the Earth a luminous disk is visible, aping the Earth's waxing phase. It is the Moon, following the Earth on its path around the Sun. It is to my regret that the configuration of my orbit was such that I passed no closer to the satellite than several hundred thousand leagues.

The projectile is extraordinarily convenient. I have only to turn a tap and I am furnished with fire and light by means of gas, which is stored in a reservoir at a pressure of several atmospheres. My food is meat and vegetables and fruit, hydraulically compressed to the smallest dimensions; and I have carried a quantity of brandy and water. My atmosphere is maintained by means of chlorate of potassium and caustic potash: The former, when heated, is transformed into chloride of potassium, and the oxygen thus liberated replaces that which I have consumed; and the potash, when shaken, extracts from the air the carbonic acid placed there by the combustion of elements of my blood.

Thus, in interplanetary space, I am as comfortable

COLUMBIAD

as if I were in the smoking lounge of the Gun Club itself, in Union Square, Baltimore!

MICHEL ARDAN WAS PERHAPS SEVENTY-FIVE. HE WAS OF LARGE BUILD, but stoop-shouldered. He sported luxuriant side-whiskers and mustache; his shock of untamed hair, once evidently red, was largely a mass of gray. His eyes were startling: Habitually he held them wide open so that a rim of white appeared above each iris, and his gaze was clear but vague, as if he suffered from near-sight.

He paced about my living room, his open collar flapping. Even at his advanced age Ardan was a vigorous, restless man, and my home, Spade House — spacious though it is — seemed to confine him like a cage. I feared besides that his booming Gallic voice must awaken Gip. Therefore I invited Ardan to walk with me in the garden; in the open air I fancied he might not seem quite so out of scale.

The house, built on the Kent coast near Sandgate, is open to a vista of the sea. The day was brisk, lightly overcast. Ardan showed interest in none of this, however.

He fixed me with those wild eyes. "You have not replied to my letters."

"I had them stopped."

"I have been forced to travel here unannounced. Sir, I have come here to beg your help."

I already regretted allowing him into my home — of course I did! — but some combination of his earnestness, and the intriguing content of those unsolicited missives, had temporarily overwhelmed me. Now, though, I stood square on my lawn, and held up the newest copy of his letter.

"Then perhaps, M. Ardan, you might explain what you mean by transmitting such romantic nonsense in my direction."

He barked laughter. "Romantic it may be. Nonsense — never!"

"Then you claim this business of 'propagating emissions' is the plain and honest truth, do you?"

"Of course. It is a system of communication devised for their purposes by Impey Barbicane and Colonel Maston. They seized on the electro-magnetic discoveries of James Maxwell with the vigor and inventiveness typical of Americans — for America is indeed the Land of the Future, is it not?"

Of that, I was not so certain.

"Colonel Maston had built a breed of mirror — but of wires, do you see? — in the shape of that geometric figure called a hyperbola — no, forgive me! — a *parabola*, for this figure, I am assured, collects all impinging waves into a single point, thus making it possible to detect the weakest ..."

"Enough." I was scarcely qualified to judge the technical possibilities of such a hypothetical apparatus. And besides, the inclusion of apparently authentic detail is a technique I have used in my own romances, to persuade the reader to accept the most outrageous fictive lies. I had no intention of being deceived by it myself!

"These missives of yours — received by Maston — purport to be from the inhabitant of a projectile, beyond the terrestrial atmosphere. And this projectile, you claim, was launched into space from the mouth of an immense cannon, the 'Columbiad,' embedded in a Florida hillside ..."

"That is so."

"But, my poor M. Ardan, you must understand that these are no more than the elements of a fiction, written three decades ago by M. Verne — your countryman — with whom I, myself, have corresponded."

Choleric red bloomed in his battered cheeks. "Verne indeed now claims his lazy and sensational books were fiction. It is convenient for him to do so. But they were not! He was commissioned to write truthful accounts of our extraordinary voyage!"

"Well, that's as may be. But see here. In M. Verne's account the projectile was launched toward the Moon. Not to Mars." I shook my head. "There is a difference, you know."

"Sir, I pray you resist treating me as imbecilic. I am well aware of the difference. The projectile was sent toward the Moon on its *first* journey — in which I had the honor of participating ..."

The afternoon was extending, and I had work to do; and I was growing irritated by this boorish Frenchman. "Then, if this projectile truly was built, perhaps you would be good enough to show it to me."

"I cannot comply."

"Why so?"

"Because it is no longer on the Earth."

"Ah." Of course not! It was buried in the red dust of Mars, with this Barbicane inside.

"But ..."

"Yes, M. Ardan?"

"I can show you the cannon."

The Frenchman regarded me steadily, and I felt an odd chill grow deep within me.

SEVENTY-THIRD DAY. FOUR MILLION ONE HUNDRED AND EIGHTY-FOUR Thousand Leagues.

Today, through my smoked glass, I have observed the passage of the Earth across the face of the Sun.

The planet appeared first as a mar in the perfect rim of the parent star. Later it moved into the full glare of the fiery ball, and was quite visible as a whole disk, dwarfed by the Sun's mighty countenance. After perhaps an hour another spot appeared, even smaller than the first: It was the Moon, following its parent toward the Sun's center.

After perhaps eight hours the passage was done.

I took several astronomical readings of this event. I measured the angles under which the Earth and Moon traveled across the Sun's disk, so that I might determine the deviation of my voyaging ellipse from the ecliptic; and the timing of the passage has furnished me with precise information on whether the projectile is running ahead or behind of the elliptical path around the Sun which I had designed. My best computations inform me that I have not deviated from the required trajectory.

It is a little more than a century since Captain James Cook, in 1769, sailed his Endeavor to Tahiti to watch Venus pass before the Sun. Could even that great explorer have imagined this journey of mine?

I have become the first human being to witness a transit of Earth! And who, I wonder, will be the second?

IT TOOK TWO DAYS FOR US TO TRAVEL BY DISPATCH-BOAT FROM NEW Orleans to the bay of Espiritu Santo, close to Tampa Town.

Ardan had the good sense to avoid my company during this brief, uncomfortable trip. My humor was not good. Since leaving England I had steadily cursed myself, and Ardan, for my foolishness in agreeing to this jaunt to Florida.

We could not ignore each other at dinner and breakfast, however. And at those occasions, we argued.

"But," I insisted, "a human occupant would be reduced to a thin film of smashed bone and flesh, crushed by recoil against the base of any such cannon-fired shell. No amount of water cushions and collapsing balsa partitions would be sufficient to avert such a fate."

"Of course that is true," Ardan said, unperturbed. "But then M. Verne did not depict the detail of the arrangement."

"Which was?"

"That Barbicane and his companions in the Gun Club anticipated precisely this problem. The Columbiad, that mighty cannon, was dug still deeper than Verne described. And it did *not* contain one single vast charge of gun-cotton, but many, positioned along its heroic length. Thus a *distributed* impulse was applied to the projectile. It is an elementary matter of algebra — for those with the right disposition, which I have not! — to compute that the forces suffered by travelers within the projectile, while punishing, were less than lethal."

"Bah! What, then, of Verne's description of conditions within the projectile, during its Lunar journey? He claims that the inhabitants suffered a sensation of levitation — but only at that point at which the gravitational pulls of Earth and Moon are balanced. Now, this is nonsense. When you create a vacuum in a tube, the objects you send through it — whether grains of dust or grains of lead — fall with the same rapidity. So with the contents of your projectile. You, sir, should have floated like a pea inside a tin can throughout your voyage!"

He shrugged. "And so I did. It was an amusing piece of natural philosophy, but not always a comfortable sensation. For the second journey we anticipated by installing a couch equipped with straps, and

hooks and eyes on the tools and implements, and additional cramp-irons fixed to the walls. As to M. Verne's inaccurate depiction of this sensation — I refer you to the author! Perhaps he did not understand. Or perhaps he chose to dramatize our condition in a way that suited the purposes of his narrative ..."

"Oh!" I said. "This debating is all by the by. M. Ardan, it is simply impossible to launch a shell to another world from a cannon!"

"It is perfectly possible." He eyed me. "As you know! — for have you not published your own account of how such shells might be fired, if not from Earth to Mars, then in the opposite direction?"

"But it was fiction!" I cried. "As were Verne's books!"

"No." He shook his large, grizzled head. "M. Verne's account was fact. It is only a skeptical world that insists it must be fiction. And that, sir, is my tragedy."



ONE HUNDRED AND THIRTY-FOURTH DAY. SEVEN MILLION, FOUR HUNDRED AND SEVENTY-SEVEN THOUSAND LEAGUES.

The air will be thin and bracing; it will be like a mountaintop on Earth. I must trust that the vegetable and animal life — whose treks and seasonal cycles have been observed, as color washes, from Earth — provide me with provision compatible with my digestion.

I have brought thermometers, barometers, aneroids, and hypsometers with which to study the characteristics of the Martian landscape and atmosphere. I have also carried several compasses, in case of any magnetic influence there. I have brought canvas, pickaxes and shovels, and nails, sacks of grain and shrubs and other seed stock: provisions with which to construct my miniature colony on the surface of Mars. For it is there that I must, of course, spend the rest of my life.

I dream that I may even encounter intelligence! — human, or some analogous form. The inhabitants of Mars will be tall, delicate, spidery creatures, their growth drawn upward by the lightness of their gravity. And their buildings likewise will be slender, beautiful structures ...

With such speculation I console myself.

I will confess to a sense of isolation. With Earth invisible, and with Mars still no more than a brightening red star, I am suspended in a starry firmament — for my speed is not discernible — and I have only the dazzling globe of the Sun himself to interrupt the curve of Heaven above and below me. Has any man been so alone?

At times I close the covers of the scuttles, and strap myself to my couch, and expend a little of my precious gas; I seek to forget my situation by immersing myself in my books, those faithful companions I have carried with me.

But I find it impossible to forget my remoteness from all of humanity that ever lived, and that my projectile, a fragile aluminum tent, is my sole protection.

WE STAYED A NIGHT IN THE FRANKLIN HOTEL IN TAMPA TOWN. IT WAS a dingy, uncomfortable place, its facilities exceedingly primitive.

At five a.m. Ardan roused me.

We traveled by phaeton. We worked along the coast for some distance — it was dry and parched — and then turned inland, where the soil became much richer, abounding with northern and tropical flora, including pineapples, cotton plants, rice, and yams. The road was well built, I thought, considering the crude and underpopulated nature of the countryside thereabouts.

I am not the physical type; I felt hot and uncomfortable, my suit of English wool restrictive and heavy, and my lungs seemed to labor at the humidity-laden air. By contrast Ardan was vibrant, evidently animated by our journey.

"When we returned to Earth — we fell back into the Pacific Ocean — our exuberance was unbounded. We imagined new and greater Columbiads. We imagined fleets of projectiles, threading

between Earth, Moon, and planets. We expected adulation!"

"As depicted by M. Verne."

"But Verne lied! — in that as in other matters. Oh, there was some celebrity — some little notoriety. But we had returned with nothing: not so much as a bag of Lunar soil; nothing save our descriptions of a dead and airless Moon.

"The building of the Columbiad was financed by public subscription. Not long after our return, the pressure from those investors began to be felt: *Where is our profit?* — that was the question."

"It is not unreasonable."

"Some influential leader-writers argued that perhaps *we had not traveled to the Moon at all*. Perhaps it was all a deception, devised by Barbicane and his companions."

"It might be the truth," I said severely. "After all, the Gun Club were weapons manufacturers who, after the conclusion of the War between the States, sought by devising this new project only to maintain investment and employment ..."

"It was not the truth! We had circled the Moon! But we were baffled by such reactions. Oh, Barbicane refused to concede defeat. He tried to raise subscriptions for a new company that would build on his achievements. But the company soon floundered, and the commissioner and magistrate pursued him on behalf of enraged debtors.

"If only the Moon had not turned out to be dead! If only we could succeed in finding a world that might draw up the dreams of man once more!

"And so Barbicane determined to commit all to one throw of the die. He took the last of his money, and used it to bore out the Columbiad, and to repair his projectile ..."

My temper deteriorated; I had little interest in Ardan's rambling reminiscences.

But then Ardan digressed, and he began to describe how it was — or so he claimed — to fall toward the Moon. His voice became remote, his eyes oddly vacant.

TWO HUNDRED AND FORTY-FIFTH DAY. TWELVE MILLION, ONE HUNDRED AND TWENTY-FIVE LEAGUES.

The projectile approaches the planet at an angle to the sunlight, so Mars is gibbous, with a slice of the night hemisphere turned toward me. The ochre shading seems to deepen at the planet's limb, giving the globe a marked roundness: Mars is a little orange, the only object apart from the Sun visible as other than a point of light in all my 360-degree sky.

To one side, at a distance a little greater than the diameter of the Martian disk, is a softly glowing starlet. If I trouble to observe for a few minutes, its relation to Mars changes visibly. Thus I have discerned that Mars has a companion: a moon, smaller than our own. And I suspect that a little farther from that central globe there may be a second satellite, but my observations are not unambiguous.

I can as yet discern few details on the disk itself, save what is known from observation through the larger telescopes on Earth. I can easily distinguish the white spot of the southern polar cap, however, which is melting in the frugal warmth of a Martian summer; following the pattern of seasons identified by William Herschel.

The air appears clear, and I can but trust that its thickness will prove sufficient to cushion my fall from space!

"I IMAGINED I SAW STREAMS OF OIL DESCENDING ACROSS THE GLASS OF the scuttle.

"I thought perhaps the projectile had developed some fault, and I made to alert Barbicane. But then my eyes found their depth, and I realized I was looking at *mountains*. They slid slowly past the glass, trailing long, black shadows. They were the mountains of the Moon.

"Our approach was very rapid. The Moon was growing visibly larger by the minute.

"The satellite was no longer the flat, yellow disk I had known from Earth: Now, tinged pale white, its center seemed to loom out at us, given three-dimensional substance by Earthlight. The landscape was fractured and complex, and utterly still and silent. The Moon is a small world, my friend. Its curve is so tight my eye could encompass

its spherical shape, even so close; I could *see* that I was flying around a ball of rock, suspended in space, with emptiness stretching to infinity in all directions.

"We passed around the limb of the Moon, and entered total darkness: No sunlight, no earthlight touched the hidden landscape rushing below."

"I asked, 'And of the Lunar egg shape which Hansen hypothesizes, the layer of atmosphere drawn to the far side by its greater mass ...'"

"We saw none of it! But ..."

"Yes?"

"But ... When the Sun was hidden behind the Lunar orb, there was light all around the Moon, as if the rim were on fire." Ardan turned to me, and his rheumy eyes were shining. "It was wonderful! Oh, it was wonderful!"

We crossed extensive plains, broken only by isolated thickets of pine trees. At last we came upon a rocky plateau, baked hard by the Sun, and considerably elevated.

TWO HUNDRED AND FIFTY-SEVENTH DAY.
One Million, Three Hundred and Thirty-Five Thousand Leagues.

The nature of Mars has become clear to me. All too clear!

There is a sharp visible difference between northern and southern hemispheres. The darker lands to the south of an equatorial line of dichotomy are punctuated by craters as densely clustered as those of the Moon; while the northern plains — which perhaps are

analogous to the dusty maria of the Moon — are generally smoother and, perhaps, younger.

A huge canyon system lies along the equator, a planetary wound visible even from a hundred thousand leagues. To the west of this gouge are clustered four immense volcanoes: Great black calderas, as dead as any on the Moon. And in the southern hemisphere I have espied a mighty crater, deep and choked with frost. Mars is clearly a small world: Some of these features sprawl around the globe, out-sized, overwhelming the curvature.

I have seen no evidence of the channels, or canals, observed by Cardinal Secchi, nor of the other mighty works of Mind which many claim to have observed. Nor, indeed, have I espied evidence of life: No herds move across these rusty plains, and not even the presence of vegetation is evident to me. Such colorings as I have discerned appear to owe more to geologic features than to the processes of life. Even Syrtis Major — Huygens' 'Hourglass Sea' — is revealed as a cratered upland, no more moist than the bleakest desert of Earth.

Thus I have been forced to confront the truth:

Mars is a dead world. As dead as the Moon!

WE GOT OUT OF OUR PHAETON AND EMBARKED BY FOOT ACROSS THAT high plain that Ardan called Stones Hill. I saw how several well-made roads converged on this desolate spot, free of traffic, enigmatic. There was even a rail track, rusting and long disused, snaking off in the direction of Tampa Town.

All over the plain I found the ruins of magazines, workshops, furnaces, and workmen's huts. Whether or not Ardan spoke the truth, it was evident that some great enterprise had taken place here.

At the heart of the plain was a low mound. This little hill was surrounded by a ring of low constructions of stone, regularly built, and set at a radius of perhaps six hundred yards from the summit itself. Each construction was topped by an elliptical arch, some of which remained intact.

I walked into this ring, two-thirds of a mile across, and looked around. "My word, Ardan!" I cried, impressed despite my skepticism. "This has the feel of some immense prehistoric site — a Stonehenge, perhaps, transported to the Americas. Why, there must be several hundred of these squat monoliths."

"More than a thousand," he said. "They are reverberating ovens, to fuse the many millions of tons of cast iron that plated the mighty

Columbiad. See here." He traced out a shallow trench in the soil. "Here are the channels by which the iron was directed into the central mold — from all twelve hundred ovens, simultaneously!"

At the summit of the hill — the convergence of the thousand trenches — there was a circular pit, perhaps sixty feet in diameter. Ardan and I approached this cavity cautiously. I found that it opened into a cylindrical shaft, dug vertically into that rocky landscape.

Ardan took a coin from his pocket and flicked it into the mouth of the great well. I heard it clatter several times against metal walls, but I could not hear it fall to rest.

Taking my courage in my hands — all my life I have suffered a certain dread of subterranean places — I stepped toward the lip of the well. I saw that its sides were sheer, evidently finely manufactured, and constructed of what appeared to be cast iron. But the iron was extensively flaked and rusted.

Looking around from this summit, I saw now a pattern to the damaged landscape: the ovens, the flimsier huts, were smashed and scattered outward from this central spot, as if some great explosion had once occurred. And I saw how disturbed soil streaked across the land, radially away from the hill; from a balloon, I speculated, these stripes of discoloration might have resembled the rays around the great craters of the Moon.

This Ozymandian scene was terrifically poignant: great things had been wrought here, and yet now these immense devices lay ruined, broken — forgotten.

Ardan paced about by the lip of the abandoned cannon; he exuded an extraordinary restlessness, as if the whole of the Earth had become a cage insufficient for him. "It was magnificent!" he cried. "When the electrical spark ignited the gun-cotton, and the ground shook, and the pillar of flame hurled aside the air, throwing over the spectators and their horses like matchstalks!... And there was the barest glimpse of the projectile itself, ascending like a soul in that fiery light ..."

I gazed up at the hot, blank sky, and imagined this Barbicane climbing into his cannon-shell, to the applause of his ageing friends. He would have called it bravery, I suppose. But how easy it must have been, to sail away into the infinite aether — forever! — and to leave behind the Earthbound complexities of debtors and broken promises. Was Barbicane exploring, I wondered — or escaping?

AS I PLUNGE TOWARD THE GLOWING POOL OF MARTIAN AIR — AS THAT russet, cratered barrenness opens out beneath me — I descend into despair. Is all of the Solar System to prove as bleak as the worlds I have visited?

This must be my last transmission. I wish my final words to be an utterance of deepest gratitude to my loyal friends, notably Colonel J. T. Maston and my partners in the National Company of Interstellar Communication, who have followed my fruitless journey across space for so many months.

I am sure this new defeat will be trumpeted by those jackals who hounded my National Company into bankruptcy; with nothing but dead landscapes as his destination, it may be many decades before man leaves the air of Earth again!

"SIR, IT SEEMS I MUST CREDIT YOUR VERACITY. BUT WHAT IS IT YOU WANT of me? Why have you brought me here?"

After his Gallic fashion, he grabbed at my arm. "I have read your books. I know you are a man of imagination. You must publish Maston's account — tell the story of this place ..."

"But why? What would be the purpose? If Common Man is unimpressed by such exploits — if he regards these feats as a hoax, or a cynical exploitation by gun manufacturers — who am I to argue against him? We have entered a new century, M. Ardan: the century of Socialism. We must concentrate on the needs of Earth — on poverty, injustice, disease — and turn our faces to new worlds only when we have reached our manhood on this one ..."

But Ardan heard none of this. He still gripped my arm, and again I saw that wildness in his old eyes — eyes that had, perhaps, seen too much. "I would go back! That is all. I am embedded in gravity. It clings, it clings! Oh, Mr. Wells, let me go back!" □

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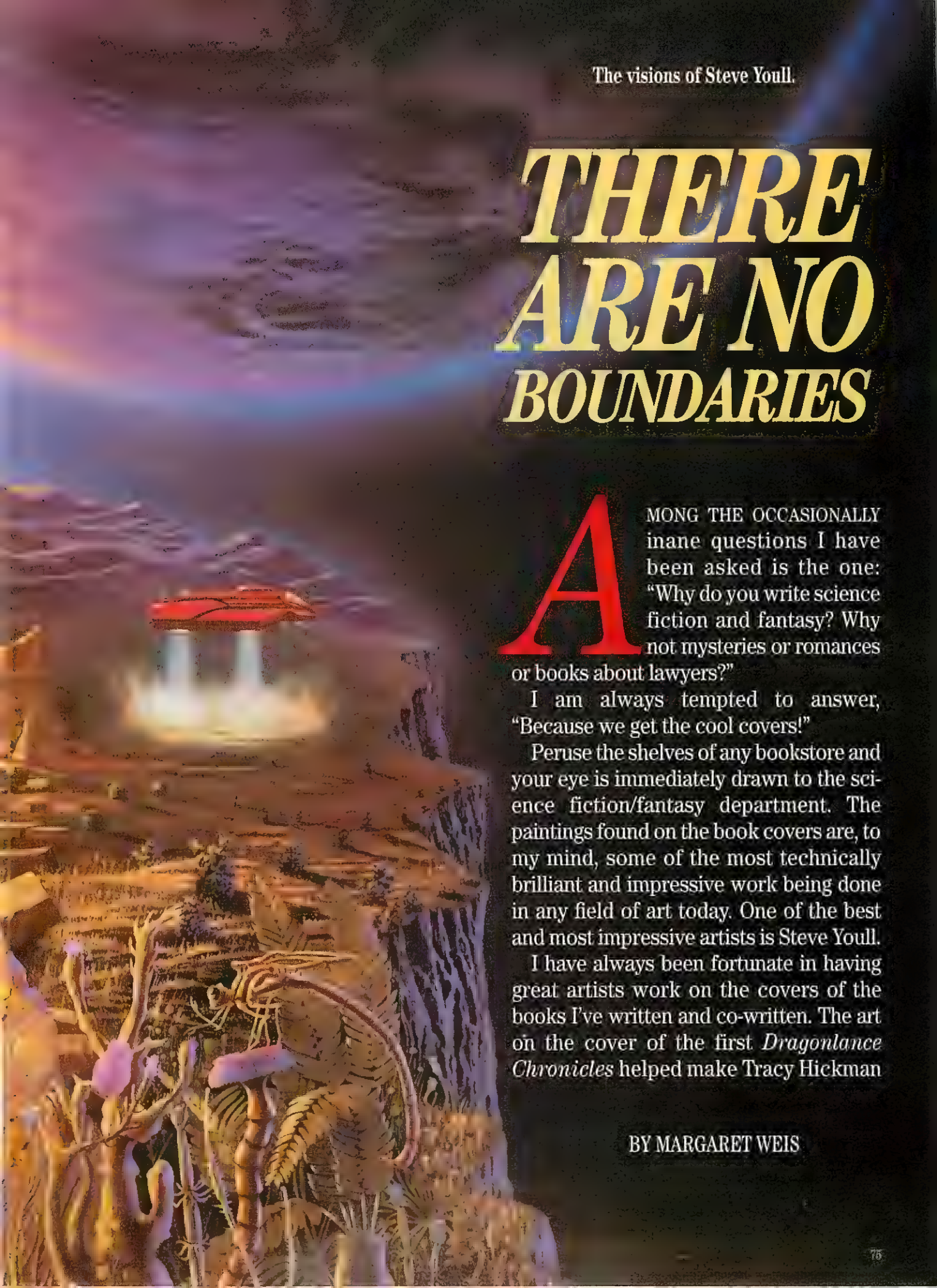
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The visions of Steve Youll.

THERE ARE NO BOUNDARIES

AMONG THE OCCASIONALLY inane questions I have been asked is the one: "Why do you write science fiction and fantasy? Why not mysteries or romances or books about lawyers?"

I am always tempted to answer, "Because we get the cool covers!"

Peruse the shelves of any bookstore and your eye is immediately drawn to the science fiction/fantasy department. The paintings found on the book covers are, to my mind, some of the most technically brilliant and impressive work being done in any field of art today. One of the best and most impressive artists is Steve Youll.

I have always been fortunate in having great artists work on the covers of the books I've written and co-written. The art on the cover of the first *Dragonlance Chronicles* helped make Tracy Hickman

BY MARGARET WEIS



and me — a couple of unknown authors — into best-selling authors.

So I've been spoiled. And then came the day when the artist was chosen to illustrate the cover of my first science fiction book, *Star of the Guardians*. My editor at Bantam at the time, Amy Stout, said that they wanted the cover to have a hard-edged science fiction feel about it, in order to attract those readers, while giving it a fantasy flavor to keep the fantasy readers. Not an easy trick to pull off. They had an artist in mind. His name was Steve Youll.

Was I familiar with his work?

No, I couldn't say that I was.

Well, not surprising, said Amy, because he was a native of England and more well-known over there than he was here. She told me the name of a book cover he had done and suggested that I look at it. I went to the bookstore the moment I hung up the phone. They had sold out.

Well, that was promising, but it didn't give me a clue as to this artist or his style.

Then I picked up George Effinger's *Fire in the Sun*. I was admiring the cover when I noticed the name of the artist. Steve Youll.

Whoa! I thought. Well done, Art gods! My luck is holding. I was still a bit nervous. Just because he was technically a fantastic artist did not mean that he was going to be able to capture the spirit of the book.

A color copy of the cover arrived. I was overwhelmed, touched, gratified, and a little mystified. He had not only captured the spirit of the book, but it looked as if he'd had the heroine in his studio to sit for her portrait!

It was later, when I first met Steve at a World Fantasy Convention, that I learned he

had read the entire manuscript before doing the painting. Authors have been known to offer up their first-born to find an artist like that. I now own that painting and also the painting Steve did for *Knights of the Black Earth*. Both hang in my living room.

Technical brilliance aside, painting people is what Steve does best. He not only paints the physical perfectly, he puts the souls of the characters on the canvas. He freezes a moment in time, much like a photograph, but his characters are far less self-conscious than they would be in a photograph. He captures them unaware.

"When I read a manuscript, the characters become very real to me and that's how I portray them."

In the *Lost King* painting, the heroine is not a "gorgeous babe," which is how I was afraid she would be portrayed on the cover. She is an older woman, as she is in the book. The legacy of conflict and loss can be seen in her eyes, her victory over both makes her beautiful.

Steve pays careful attention to every detail, such as the antique weapons the cyborg Xris carries in the painting for *Knights of the Black Earth*. Steve called me one day and said he was thinking about Xris and wouldn't Xris be the type to collect antique weapons? I thought about Xris a moment and agreed. It's really wonderful when the artist can introduce the author to some new aspect of her character!

Steve and his twin brother Paul were born in the small village ("it's a very small village!" Steve emphasizes) of Wheatley Hill, in County Durham. Steven and Paul attended Durham New College for two years and went on to Sunderland University for two years. Both graduated at the top of



their class in illustration.

Both brothers had known since they were small what they wanted to be — science fiction artists. They knew they wanted a career in the field and, unlike some who stumble along haphazardly, hoping for a "break," the two brothers made deliberate plans to make their dreams happen.

"I was attracted to the subject at first, not necessarily the art form," Steve says. "Looking back, I was heavily influenced by science fiction movies like *Star Wars* and comic books like *2000 AD*. But what attracted me most were book jackets from SF novels."

After graduation, Steve and Paul worked at Durham Cathedral as reconstruction artists. One of their projects was creating an aerial view of a cutaway of the cathedral from



original plans which were over one thousand years old. During this time, they worked on developing their portfolios, producing paintings which could be used as samples, hoping to break into the publishing field.

Their break came when they exhibited their paintings at the World Science Fiction Convention in Brighton, England in 1987. Several editors saw their paintings and were impressed. One was so impressed that he copied Steve's name down on a piece of paper. Returning to New York, he gave the paper to his art director.

"The art director called me and offered me the job," Steve recalls. "Paul and I both worked on that first painting, sometimes sitting side-by-side. We couldn't believe it. This is what we'd worked for all our lives."



TOP LEFT: Youll's cover art for the Star Wars book *Tales From Jaba's Palace*. **LEFT:** "By the time I finished all the gems I was ready to hang myself," says the artist about his detailed work on the featured alien of Ian McDonald's *Speaking in Tongues*. **ABOVE:** Youll was asked to illustrate a burgeoning alien planet for the cover of David Zindell's *The Broken God*. **PREVIOUS PAGES:** This cover painting for a shared world anthology edited by Robert Silverberg depicted the alien world of Murasaki.





The brothers worked this way for several years, until Steve moved to America. "It was hard, leaving Paul. I was really nervous when I was first on my own," he says wistfully.

Steve has been painting professionally for over ten years now. He paints in acrylic and in oil, on masonite and illustration board, using whatever medium suits the painting best. He is a perfectionist, never satisfied with a finished painting, continually striving to master his craft. He enjoys painting a vast array of subjects from robots to dragons. He concentrates on covers for paperback and hardback novels, but he is expanding out into other fields, such as the collectible trading card game market, producing several fine pieces for the game tied to the book *Star of the Guardians*.

What would Steve like to see happen in the field of science fiction art?

"I'd like to see the art form taken seriously by the mainstream art community. There are many exceptional artists in the field today," Steve says. "It makes me really angry when I hear critics in art galleries and museums putting us down."

"I try to be true to every book I illustrate, so that each painting reveals a different aspect of the novel. Of course, choosing just one particular scene from the story can't possibly



represent the whole story. I use symbolism to bring out the theme of the plot or to represent the depth of the character. An example of this is a short story collection written by Ian McDonald called *Speaking in Tongues*. The title was very visual to me. I envisioned a human and an alien trying to find a way to

FAR LEFT: The artist's cover to Stephen Donaldson's *Forbidden Knowledge* evokes the vast sense of scale between humans and aliens. **ABOVE:** Margaret Weis' own *Robot Blues*, co-authored with Don Perrin, is graced with an image of a rip-roaring space opera. **LEFT:** The cover for Isaac Asimov's *Robots of Dawn* is a portrait of the positronic man who will be the savior of us all.

communicate. I think the painting and the title worked together to create an evocative book cover."

Steve's paintings are never static. When viewing his art, you can easily imagine that something happened to these people before and that something is going to happen to them immediately afterward. The combination of realistic figures, and the incredibly detailed backgrounds, keeps the viewer entranced.

Steve's latest painting for co-author Don Perrin and me is for the new *Mag Force 7* book called *Robot Blues*. The painting captures the exciting, action-packed, go-for-the-glory feel of the book and its characters.

Looks like I'm going to have to find more wall space. □



ON THE GOLCONDAR

BY DANIEL HOOD

Illustration by John Berkey



I AM BY NO MEANS THE most important member of the *Mauritania's* crew. In fact, I think that the directors of Cunard Space Lines would probably consider me to be one of the least important crewmembers. After all, Cunard prides itself on two things: extraordinarily attentive service and unparalleled luxury — and at first glance a detective like myself has very little to do with either.

Porters, stewards, waiters, chefs, masseuses, barbers, and valets undoubtedly do more to create the *Mauritania's* atmosphere of opulence and sybaritic ease, and I would be the last person to deny that. For that matter, the brass knobs on every cabin door (doorknobs on a spaceship!) prob-

ably do more to create that atmosphere than I do.

Creating the atmosphere is one thing, though; maintaining it is another. Because the things that don't happen to you on a cruise are as important as the things that do. A shave on the *Mauritania* is a wonderful experience; you're plied with steaming towels and fresh lather, while skilled and dextrous fingers draw a straight-razor perilously close to your jugular. It's a sensuous experience — but not much good if your cabin is being rifled while you're buried under the hot towels.

Interplanetary passengers aboard the *Mauritania* paid to be spoiled, not murdered. That's where Detective Burke came in.

RUN

A hand of poker in one of the Gaming Rooms is another great experience: the slap of a new deck of cards on the immaculate green felt, the luster of the monogrammed chips, the good whiskey, and the hand-rolled cigars. It's the best hand of poker you'll ever play — unless you're being cheated by a shark who's about to take you for all you're worth.

And if you're on the *Mauritania*, you're worth a great deal.

The problem is that if you're worth enough to be on the *Mauritania*, stealing from you and those like you can be a very lucrative profession. Planet-side, this is a risk the very wealthy have to face, and if they are robbed, they turn to a detective — public or private — and ask him or her to solve the problem. That's because you don't pay anyone for peace of mind planet-side.

On a Cunard liner, though, you are paying a large sum of money for peace of mind — for that atmosphere of opulence and sybaritic ease which a theft or a crooked card game will destroy.

Hence me. My job is not to recover whatever was stolen, but to make sure it was never stolen in the first place. Not to make sure that the card shark is caught and punished, but that you never get in a game with him at all.

It's a combination of a juggling act and Zen exercise, because you must combine a detective's desire to know the truth with the Cunard directors' desire to maintain appearances.

This is all a little philosophical — let me give you an example. I like this story because it has everything: a beautiful girl, an evil villain, an assassination plot, and of course, the most magnificent setting imaginable, the *Mauritania*.

I also like it because, in the end, I got it right.

THE BEAUTIFUL GIRL'S NAME WAS Promila Ghokali, and it was her first trip out from Earth. The *Mauritania* was on the Earth-Sagan-Golcondar passage then, and she was going out to run a family concern in the system. The Ghokalis are a matriarchal clan, and like a lot of Indian family corporations, they like to try out the rising generation in distant colonial divisions.

So, though she was only eighteen, she had a giant suite on the *Mauritania*'s uppermost deck and was going to administer a corporate division the size of a continent. She had an uncle with her as chaperone and adviser, and the two of them came aboard the ship from Luna Station.

To be honest, I didn't really notice her at first. I always go through the passenger list in the days before departure, familiarizing myself with names and backgrounds, and so I saw her picture and read a little about her — but I'm looking for problems, and she didn't seem to represent a problem. Her baggage list included nothing that would attract a thief's attention; her name had never been mentioned negatively in the press, she had no record, and she had that uncle-chaperone to keep an eye on her.

So I didn't notice her at first, although she was beautiful. She was no more than the sum of her parts, but her parts were perfect: almond eyes; a long, fine nose with delicately pronounced nostrils; flawless skin that was naturally the warm mahogany shade other people spend years burning onto themselves; black, foamy hair; and her figure.... I'll stop now. Suffice it to say that she was really quite beautiful, and that I didn't notice her until almost a week into the trip.

Most of the early part of her voyage I pieced together from things she told me later, or that I heard from stewards and porters and waiters. She came aboard on her uncle's arm, was ensconced in her suite, tipped well, and acted all in all like a normal passenger.

The *Mauritania* embarked on schedule and headed out-system, and Ms. Ghokali spent the first few days of the cruise wandering

the ship, admiring it and enjoying herself. She swam a little, played tennis once or twice with her uncle, read a few novels (the *Mauritania* has several excellent libraries). Mostly, though, she wandered the ship. The steward assigned to her part of the top deck told me that she acted as if she'd lived aboard a liner all her life, but she said that every new corridor and room had been like a revelation to her — that so much beauty and opulence could actually travel between the stars.

She walked miles of hallways carpeted in hand-woven oriental rugs, ducked into a dozen intimate lounges filled with deep leather club chairs, tried to count the perfect lozenges of parquet in both ballrooms, gave up, and danced a solo waltz in one, early in the morning. She entered each and every boutique and store in the shopping arcade — she bought nothing — and stumbled on a rehearsal of the ship's symphony in the 300-seat concert hall.

The room she liked best was the Forward Lounge, which happens to be my favorite as well. It's a lounge like most of the others — wing-back chairs, wood paneling, the odd print or two, a well-stocked bar — but it has an enormous circular window that looks out on the stars. Four arched panes of glass surround the larger central pane, which is about five feet across, and the whole thing is mullioned and framed with perfectly bent and finished wood. It's a remarkable contrast, to sit in this Edwardian parlor and be able to turn your gaze out to the stars. It's best when the *Mauritania* is in-system, with a planet looming larger and larger across the window like the disk of an eclipse. On quiet passages I'll sit in the Forward Lounge and watch a planet-fall for hours.

Even when there's nothing in the window but stars, I still find it the most wonderful place on the ship, and Ms. Ghokali apparently agreed.

By the end of the week it took us to get beyond Sol system, she was spending large parts of her day there, ensconced in a club chair, pretending to read but mostly contemplating the duties she was about to take on. She was a very sober young woman, as I recall, and my impression of her, gathered mostly toward the end of the voyage, was that she would make an excellent administrator, despite her youth. At the time, though, she was uncertain about her own skills, and I suppose that is why she was open to Farraday's advances.

JOSEPH FARRADAY HAD CAUGHT MY EYE THE MOMENT I READ HIS passenger transcript. He had a dangerous profile: handsome, young, traveling alone, no clippings, no problems. It's the sort of profile that professionals try to cultivate, because they don't really know much about the very rich. Here are a couple of truisms about rich young gentlemen: if they're handsome, they've gotten into trouble; they never travel alone, either because they don't like having to make new acquaintances or because their families won't let them; and they all have clippings, from prep school or university or the hometown society pages. No rich young man has gone unmentioned upon.

So when someone like Farraday — a blank slate with good looks, boards the ship — I make a point of keeping an eye on him. I checked on Farraday twice or three times a day, seeing who he was talking to, where he was spending his time. Once I arranged to dine at his table and found that, while his good looks had attracted a lot of favorable attention, and his good manners and wit had deepened the attention, he had no obvious designs on any of the other passengers.

I should explain a little about how I work. My name and title are not listed in the *Mauritania*'s directory, and I doubt very many people even know that Cunard has detectives on their ships. What I do is simply wander around the ship and keep an eye on things. I dress like a passenger — I get an extraordinary discount on clothing in the ship's stores — and I act like a passenger. I strike up conversations, I eat in the passenger dining rooms, I have drinks in the bars and coffee in the lounges. It's a little like going undercover, and it has allowed me to frustrate any number of unpleasant schemes.

In any case, just about the same time that Farraday was introducing himself to Ms. Ghokali in the Forward Lounge, I had removed him from my highly suspect list to my less-suspect list, and was moving on to interfere with a crooked medium who was trying to take an elderly woman for vast sums of money.

Ms. Ghokali later told me that she had just finished watching the last of Pluto disappear from the lounge's window and had turned reluctantly back to her reader, which contained a wealth of information on the business she was going to run.

She knew it backward and forward — output estimates, wage and productivity ratios, transport schemes, plant and equipment evaluations — but the dryness of it frustrated her. It seemed that one of her passions at university was sociology, and she was curious not just about the business she was going to run, but the place she was going to run it in, and the people who were going to work for her. Besides, she had been taught (and firmly believed) that management was more than just knowing the numbers and the schedules. It was the morale and the local customs, it was a feel for the marketplace, and she thought the report was singularly lacking any feel for the continent-sized business she was supposed to run.

After several requests, Uncle Nirmal had produced a few outdated travel brochures; apparently he had been quite uninterested in understanding the psychology of his work force or his market. With a somewhat bitter sigh, she began rereading her uncle's reports on projected earnings.

Then she noticed the man looking over her shoulder. "Dry stuff," he commented, nodding at the reader in her hand. "Projected Quarterly Earnings for the Textiles Division of Golcondar IV. Very dry stuff."

"Proprietary 'stuff,'" she corrected coldly, turning the reader off.

He moved around her chair and took a seat opposite her. Farraday was pure Anglo handsome, white skin and short blond hair, a boyish smile of even white teeth, neatly but not flashily dressed. He was about twenty-five. "There are a lot more interesting things about Golcondar IV than textiles," he said.

Ms. Ghokali had been about to dismiss him, she told me, to cut him dead and go back to her reader, but she was surprised that he knew anything about the Golcondar system. It's mostly Indian colonies.

Still, she didn't try to sound friendly. "I suppose you've been there?"

"Once," he admitted cheerfully, "and not for very long, I must admit. Just a month or so. But I was more taken with the people than with the textiles."

"Really? Are they very colorful?" She told me that she put an ironic emphasis on the last word, very earnestly explaining that she didn't think much of rich and idle tourists who found the working classes quaint.

His reply surprised her. "Colorful? No, not really colorful. Textiles are colorful. They're sort of ... purposeful, if you take my meaning. Not hardworking, but determined. There's a lot going on there, under the surface. They know what they want, and they're going to get it."

Ms. Ghokali thought that he must have been sent down from heaven to answer the sort of questions her uncle's travel brochures hadn't. And so, in their chairs by the window under the stars, she began to interrogate him about Golcondar IV.

NOW REMEMBER, I KNEW NOTHING ABOUT THIS. I WAS BUSY INSINUATING myself into the little group that had sprung up around the fraudulent medium, and thought I was doing very well. I had moved Farraday to my less-suspicious list, so I only checked up on him once a day or so. Unless they're very good gold diggers — and that was what I thought Farraday would turn out to be, if he turned out to be a criminal at all — they usually make the mistake of spending entirely too much time with their marks. So I thought that if I dropped in on him now and then, I would be able to see if he was trying to move in on one of the other passengers.

Cunard directors may see ship's detectives as an unfortunate necessity, but I will grant them this: They don't do things by halves. So I have access to the passenger location system (PLS), a morally and legally dubious piece of equipment that allows a few select crewmembers to track any passenger, anywhere on the *Mauritania*. It's a very handy thing for locating lost children, making sure everyone is aboard after a day in dock and, should we ever have to abandon ship, making sure everyone has left. It's dubious because the DNA imprints which the PLS uses to search are taken without the passengers' knowledge, and its sensors run throughout the ship.

The potential for invading peoples' privacy is enormous; suffice it to say that I know of at least three famous marriages that would be ruined if the PLS data from the *Mauritania* were released. Naturally, Cunard vets the people with PLS access very carefully, and webs them in with all sorts of signatures, oaths, and binding agreements.

In any case, I had the PLS tech run a check on Farraday a few times a day, and after two days it became clear that he was spending a great deal of time in the Forward Lounge, and his DNA imprint happened to be seated next to the DNA imprint of Ms. Promila Ghokali. Seated a decorous meter or so away, but nonetheless I was interested.

The business with the medium was close to done, and was just waiting for the finishing touches, which had to wait for the "seance" he had arranged. So I took advantage of the lull to stroll up to the Forward Lounge, a reader in hand, and took a seat near Farraday and Ms. Ghokali. After a little judicious eavesdropping, my impression was that if he had chosen her for a mark, he had chosen poorly. While I listened, she hammered him with questions about Golcondar IV, taking furious notes and cross-questioning him, referring to past notes.

For some reason, I am one of those people other people never notice. I lingered by them for over an hour, staring dreamily out the window, less than two meters away from them, but they never noticed. Their conversation never moved far from Golcondar IV.

"So you're saying the work force is essentially unstable?" I remember her saying at one point, as if she were a prosecutor who had made a witness admit something crucial.

"Well," he said, reddening as he tried to see how she had reached that conclusion from his words, "Yes. Yes, I suppose I am. But with proper management"

I came away with the impression that Ms. Ghokali had made Farraday her crammer for a particularly important exam — and no more.

For good measure, I had myself seated at Ms. Ghokali's table that evening for dinner. She sat with her uncle, a potbellied man with a bulbous nose and a self-important manner. Farraday was at their table, but the seating charts are made up by Cunard staff, and he sat quite far away from her. They exchanged nothing more than polite nods across the linen, and a comment or two about the quality of the food. She thought it excellent; he was noncommittal.

In any case, I was reassured that their time in the Forward Lounge was probably nothing more than a little tutoring. I moved Farraday even further down my list of suspicious characters, and devoted myself to the medium for a day or two.

We were two full days into hyperdrive when Ms. Ghokali's uncle asked to see me.

UNLIKE MOST LONG-DISTANCE SHIPS, THE *MAURITANIA* DOES NOT sedate its passengers or its crew during hyperdrive, and it maintains full standard Earth gravity. The expense in shielding and energy is enormous, but, then, so are the ticket prices, and not being locked in an isochamber for the long passage makes the trip much more civilized. So Nirmal Ghokali was able to call a steward on our second day in 'drive and ask to speak with the ship's detective. On another ship he would have been unconscious.

As I mentioned before, my name and title are not mentioned in any place where a passenger might see them. They should, ideally, never know that I'm aboard — so for a passenger to ask for me was something of a surprise.

"Are you quite sure he asked for me?" I asked the chief steward, when he relayed the request from a rather flustered under-steward.

"Not by name, sir," the chief steward replied. "He just asked that the ship's detective call on him in his cabin. My man naturally said he wasn't sure we even had such a thing, and this Mr. Ghokali just laughed and said he would be in between two and four bells."

I thanked the chief steward and made my way to Nirmal Ghokali's cabin. I was not much bothered by the fact that he knew there was a detective aboard — any mildly intelligent person could guess that Cunard would have to have something along those lines — but I was curious about the coincidence. I had, after all, been watching his niece.

He opened the door of the cabin at my knock, and gazed up at me imperiously. Since we had eaten at the same table, I could tell that he

recognized me — and I could also tell that he was not pleased with the interruption. “Yes?”

“Mr. Ghokali, my name is Burke. I’m the *Mauritania*’s detective.”

His eyes went round with comic surprise, and he clapped a hand on his fat little belly. “But you — but you dined with us!” I must confess that I’ve never heard the word ‘dined’ made to sound as if it were a crime.

“Yes, I did, Mr. Ghokali,” I said. “I often dine with the passengers. May I come in?”

He backed away from the door, allowing me into the parlor of his suite, all the while staring at me in wonder that slowly turned to puzzlement. I am not very wonderful to look at, in the end — average height, average look, plain (if expensive) clothes, glasses — and I thought he was trying to figure out how such a weedy-looking specimen could call itself a detective.

When he sat, I did too, crossing my legs comfortably but not too comfortably. “I understand you asked to see me, Mr. Ghokali. Is there a problem of some sort?”

He wobbled his head from side to side, his hands splayed on his belly as pregnant women do. We were in the sitting room of his suite. “Yes, Burke, there is a problem, oh yes. I am traveling with my niece, and there is a gentleman I would like you to keep away from her.”

“Ah,” I said, nodding sagely. “Would that be Mr. Farraday?”

He didn’t seem surprised that I knew the name, but I was quickly gathering that Nirmal Ghokali took a number of things for granted, among them obedience and an understanding that his affairs were of prime importance to everyone around him. “Just the man! He is a nuisance to her!”

“I see,” I said, though I didn’t. “I’ll see to it that he doesn’t dine at your table anymore, Mr. Ghokali.”

“That is hardly sufficient. My niece must be protected, twenty-four hours a day.” His head stopped wobbling, and he nodded once, firmly.

“I’m afraid we’re not able to provide that kind of protection on the *Mauritania*, sir. Are you quite sure she needs it? I mean, what has Mr. Farraday done to worry you?”

Ghokali sputtered for a moment or two, clearly unused to having his demands questioned. “Why, why — he annoys her!”

“Are you quite sure of that?” I asked, as gently as I could. “I happened to see the two of them together in the Forward Lounge just the other day, and Ms. Ghokali seemed quite content with his company.”

Still sputtering, he threw up his hands. “It is unacceptable! She should not be spending so much time with him! She is just a girl!”

I refrained from mentioning that, although just a girl, she was going out to Golcondar IV to run a continent. Instead, I repeated my offer to change Farraday’s dinner seating. “Really, Mr. Ghokali, there’s nothing we can do. I understand your concern over your niece,” I lied. “However, we can’t provide bodyguards, nor can we confine Mr. Farraday to his cabin.”

Ghokali started wobbling his head again, and emitting a sort of soft wailing noise from the back of his throat. He was getting quite worked up, while I was losing my patience. I have seen passengers throw fits before, of course, but never at me, always at a waiter or a steward or a maid.

And that was just what I thought he was doing — throwing a fit. He rocked back and forth in his chair, muttering and moaning incoherently, and, finally, just when my patience was about worn thin (how do the stewards put up with this kind of behavior?), he collected himself, cast a suspicious eye around the room, and leaned forward.

“My niece may be the target of assassins,” he whispered conspiratorially. His eyes bulged out above his already bulging nose, and I could have sworn there was foam at the corners of his mouth. “The Golcondarese are a rebellious lot of savages, you know, and they don’t like our company at all. Not at all. I think they will try to kill her.”

I am willing to credit the passengers of the *Mauritania* with any number of awful intentions. Theft, blackmail, adultery, cheating, backstabbing, sexual perversions of every stripe — I have come to expect these from the very rich people who take Cunard passages. But I had never seen or heard of an assassination on a Cunard liner, and speaking frankly, Ghokali was in no condition to make me

believe. I immediately dismissed his suspicions as the product of the sort of paranoia sometimes indulged in by the very rich, particularly those with children in their care.

“Mr. Farraday hardly strikes me as a Golcondarese rebel, Mr. Ghokali,” I said, supercilious but respectfully so. “And I’m quite sure there will be no assassinations aboard the *Mauritania*.”

“Nonetheless,” I went on, before he could explode, as the look on his face promised me he would, “I will make a special point of keeping an eye on Mr. Farraday, and attempt to separate him from your daughter as much as possible.”

I was able to escape in another ten minutes or so, after listening to a remarkable harangue on the ingratitude of the Golcondarese and their various unpleasant habits, the least of which was a tendency to attack their employers.

AFTER LEAVING GHOKALI’S SUITE, I stopped in at one of the ship’s libraries and downloaded a few articles on Golcondar IV into my reader. He had by no means convinced me that his niece was in any danger, but his extreme feelings about the colonists had at least aroused my curiosity.

Golcondar had been settled almost entirely by Indians, most of them indentured labor brought out by family corporations like the Ghokalis, who owned two of Golcondar II’s mineral-bearing moons and the larger of Golcondar IV’s two continents. The entire system was a labor rights activist’s nightmare, and Golcondar IV was only slightly better than the other planets. There had been an outright worker rebellion in the early days of settlement, but after the Ghokalis bought their way in, the situation had cooled down to the exchange of lawsuits in Terran courts about the length of the workday and dangerous working conditions and so on, not to mention any number of petitions to the World League for membership. The holdings of other corporations in the system still erupted into fighting now and again, so I presumed that the Ghokalis were better managers than most, and if the workers on Golcondar IV had progressed to petitions for sovereignty, I guessed that political assassinations were probably behind them.

Nonetheless, I decided to keep an eye on Farraday and Ms. Ghokali, mostly for the sake of thoroughness, but also because I had still not crossed the young man off my list of the suspicious. I took my reader to the Forward Lounge and found them deep in conversation. There is no outside view when the *Mauritania* is in hyperdrive, so the window screen showed Sagan, a particularly attractive binary system within a dust cloud. I found a chair convenient for watching the scene and eavesdropping, and spent the next few hours comfortably.

Their conversation was entirely boring, elaborations and analyses of the information I had just gotten from the library. I have to admit that I did not pay much attention; just enough to know they were not planning to elope or to hijack the ship. After a few hours, I left them alone in the Lounge, quite convinced that Ms. Ghokali was not falling prey to Farraday’s amorous or larcenous advances.

As it turned out, I needn’t have worried about her on that score — she told me later that she finds Anglos singularly unattractive. It also seems that I should have stayed longer, because I had been gone no longer than five minutes before Farraday changed the subject of their conversation. Of course, I’m sure that if I hadn’t left he wouldn’t have brought up the idea of going ashore at Sagan Station, but there you are: hindsight.

In any case, shortly after I left them alone, he waited for a pause and said: “You know, I really know very little about you, Ms. Ghokali, and all we seem to do is discuss Golcondar.”

"What do you mean, Mr. Farraday?" she replied, misunderstanding his point. "You know what my family does, and you know what I am going to do. So you know that Golcondar is very important to me."

"Yes, yes," he said with a smile. "I don't mean that I don't know why you're interested Golcondar. I mean that that's all we ever talk about, and you must forgive me if I'm a little tired of it. Just for a little while, let's talk about something else."

Ms. Ghokali told me later that she was quite embarrassed by this. It had never occurred to her that Farraday wasn't as interested in Golcondar as she was, and she felt she had been quite rude to make him discuss it day after day.

"Of course, of course," she said hurriedly, blushing. I have seen her blush since, and it's very pretty — little dusty roses on her cheeks. "I'm very sorry. What would you like to talk about?"

Farraday waved his hand negligently. "Oh, anything at all, and just for a little bit. For instance, tell me — have you ever been to Sagan before?"

"No, never," Ms. Ghokali said, recovering a little from her embarrassment. "This is my first trip out."

"First trip from Earth?" he exclaimed. "I'd never have guessed. So you've never seen Sagan? You really should, you know."

"The ship is stopping there, isn't it? I'll see it then, I suppose."

"Oh — so you plan to go ashore?"

She shook her head, confused again. "Ashore?"

He smiled. "Onto Sagan Station. Cunard insists on calling any departure from the ship 'going ashore.' A sort of harmless nostalgia." (Ms. Ghokali has an excellent memory, and assured me afterward that these were the exact words he used to describe a very carefully cultivated marketing concept — "a harmless nostalgia." The directors *would not be pleased*.) "The *Mauritania* will dock at Sagan Station, and there will be time for us to board and take a look. They have some rather interesting displays on the dust cloud there."

"Dust cloud?" Ms. Ghokali was not the least interested in dust clouds, and this must have shown in her expression. Farraday laughed.

"It covers most of the system. But the point is that it's very pretty to look at. I'm not sure why — something about there being two suns and the reflective quality of most of the dust and radiation patterns and so on. A scientist could explain it better. All I know is that it's very pretty. There are a number of places to watch it on the Station, and they show it in all the different spectra, so you can see the radiation patterns."

"I take it you've seen it," she said, still skeptical of the attractions of a dust cloud.

"Once. It's worth about half an hour of your time. Would you like to go?"

Thinking that half an hour was little enough to repay him for all the time he had spent discussing Golcondar IV with her, she agreed. She also thought that the dust cloud would probably be just as (un)interesting from the Forward Lounge, but since Farraday seemed to think it looked better from the station

It was only after dinner that evening, back in her stateroom, that she imagined he might consider the trip ashore a date. She quickly decided against it. After all, he had never shown the least interest in her in that way.

THE REST OF THE FIRST HYPERSPACE LEG OF THE *MAURITANIA*'S OUTWARD-bound journey to Golcondar was uneventful as far as Ms. Ghokali was concerned. I found her with Farraday only twice in the five visits I made to the Forward Lounge, and the PLS information showed that they spent somewhat less time together.

I couldn't guess why their meetings were shorter, but I was relieved by it, imagining Farraday to have perceived that Ms. Ghokali would not be an easy mark. Ms. Ghokali told me afterward that she grew apprehensive about their outing as the ship's arrival at Sagan Station grew closer, and that she may have been less inclined to conversation with him, but that it was mostly he who broke off contact, leaving the Forward Lounge earlier than usual. I still can't guess why, and Farraday can't tell us — the only thing I can imagine would be a desire not to be seen as too

often in her company. He may even have been aware of my presence. Who knows?

In any case, left alone more often, Ms. Ghokali resumed her old activities: wandering the ship, playing tennis with her uncle, reading in the Forward Lounge. Farraday spent more time in his cabin, leaving only for meals, the occasional sauna, an evening drink or two in some of the ship's many bars, and his now-shorter daily meetings with Ms. Ghokali.

Her uncle did not call for me again and, happy at the way things were working on that front, I concentrated on the fraudulent medium. By the end of the first hyperspace leg, I had insinuated myself into his group far enough that I was quite sure he meant to make me one of his marks, in the process collecting enough information to compromise him.

Shortly after leaving hyperspace, I confronted the medium and explained that his presence was no longer required aboard, and that if he chose to leave the *Mauritania* at Sagan Station, Cunard would be happy to refund the price of his ticket onto Golcondar. Two burly stewards and a glance at the evidence I had collected made the situation clear to him, and the evening before we arrived at the Station he gave a very convincing closing performance. The members of his little group, myself included, were all quite disappointed.

When he left the *Mauritania* the next day, he took the good wishes of a number of the ship's more gullible passengers — but none of their money.

MS. GHOKALI AND FARRADAY ALSO LEFT THE *MAURITANIA* AT SAGAN Station, going ashore to see the dust cloud display he had spoken about. She saw the excursion as something of a duty, after his forbearance in answering her relentless questions about Golcondar IV, but still presented herself with a smile, and gave him her arm as they went down the gangplank. (The gangplank is what Cunard, with 'harmless nostalgia,' calls the docking gate; the part that is attached to the *Mauritania* actually slopes down, and is fitted out with rope guides and wooden planking. The only thing the directors have left out is the smell of harbor waters — and all the things that usually find their way into harbor waters.)

She actually enjoyed the first part of the day. In addition to being a hub from which passengers can reach nearby systems, Sagan Station's owners have some of the same goals as Cunard. The station is clean, well-run, and attractive to the rich. The style is more 20th century mall than 19th century luxury liner, but history has never been the strong suit of the rich — and there are plenty of sights to see. There is a beautifully kept beach at one end of the station core (it's an axial-spin cylinder with docking spars at either end), three waterfalls, and four rivers running the length of the core.

Apparently there is also an excellent bookstore because Ms. Ghokali managed to upload a rare ethnography on Indian emigrant workers that Farraday recommended.

"So?" he said, a hint of good-humored reproach in his smile. "Still regret coming?"

She blushed and held up the reader. "Not at all. This has made it all worth it. Now I can resign myself to your dust cloud. Let's go." She gave him her arm, and they crossed the nearest river and headed for one of the theaters.

THE *MAURITANIA* ONLY DOCKS AT SAGAN STATION FOR ABOUT SIX HOURS. As soon as we enter the system, a fast lighter is sent ahead with the baggage of those passengers who are disembarking, so it's waiting for them when they arrive. The six hours allows those passengers going on to Golcondar time for a quick tour of the station. By the time Ms. Ghokali and Farraday were heading for the dust cloud theater, it was three hours to departure.

At the same time, I was in the office of the station security chief, an old acquaintance named Dallyeva, explaining about the medium.

"There's nothing to hold him on," I said. "It didn't get that far. All he did was rig a few parlor tricks — he never asked anybody for any money."

Dallyeva used to work for the World League's law enforcement

arm; she has always caught on quickly. "But he was eager to leave the *Mauritania*."

"Exactly. So you may want to watch him —"

"— and usher him offstation ASAP. Thank you very much for the tip, Mr. Burke."

"My pleasure, Ms. Dalyeva."

In return, she offered me her opinion of the dozen or so passengers joining the *Mauritania* at Sagan Station. None had raised her suspicions, but she gave me copies of their files so I could take a look myself. What should have been a quick transaction lingered on a little bit, I'm afraid — old acquaintances and all that, shop talk. By the time I returned to the *Mauritania*, there were only two hours to departure. The steward at the gangplank told me that Ms. Ghokali's uncle had been leaving frantic messages for me all over the ship.

AT JUST ABOUT THAT TIME, MS. GHOKALI AND FARRADAY WERE LEAVING the theater. The display had turned out to be more interesting than she expected (the Sagan dust clouds are very beautiful, in the right spectra). They came out into the bright light of station-day, blinking a little, and strolled across the nearby river, and then Farraday was struck by an idea.

"You know," he said, snapping his fingers, "I may have a friend here." There was a public-access directory nearby, and he guided their steps to it.

"Someone who lives here?" Ms. Ghokali asked, still seeing afterimages from the radio spectra of the system that had ended the show.

Farraday punched into the directory and called up the dock listings. "No, a yachtsman fellow named Hancock. The last time I heard from him, he said he was going to cruise around this system. And voila! There he is! Peter Hancock, the *Sun Lover*." He pointed out the entry, and Ms. Ghokali nodded.

"It's so odd," she said, "to think that in all the vast expanse of space, people can just randomly run into each other." She told me that she hadn't the slightest inkling of the significance of what she'd said.

Farraday smiled a trifle nervously. "Well, we haven't exactly run into each other. I mean, I would have to go to his ship to run into him." He paused, considering. "I wonder, would you mind going there with me? I haven't seen Peter in quite a while, and he's very nice, and we wouldn't have to stay very long."

Ms. Ghokali said, "Why not? As long as we're back on the *Mauritania* before it leaves."

They both laughed.

UNCLE NIRMAL WAS ONCE AGAIN DOING HIS BEST TO MAKE SURE I DIDN'T take him seriously. There were three messages, each more frenzied and tantrum-like than the ones before, and I listened to them in my cabin.

"My niece has left the station with that madman Farraday!" he screamed on the last one. "He is going to run off with her, I'm sure of it! He may even kill her! Where are you, Burke? Where are you?"

I shook my head slowly, allowing myself a small smile at the madness of the very rich. A handsome young man takes an interest in a beautiful young girl, and this old man insists that he's an assassin. Ridiculous!

Still, service is an important part of the Cunard mystique, so I decided to check on Ms. Ghokali and the oh-so-deadly Farraday in a discreet manner. With no particular sense of urgency I made my way down to the PLS suite, and had the operator trace them. Just as Uncle Nirmal had shouted, they had left the *Mauritania* together a few hours before.

On board the *Mauritania*, the PLS system operates constantly, and we keep historical data on passenger movements throughout the ship for the length of the cruise. But the system can also be linked to the ship's external scanners and used to trace passengers outside the ship at any given moment. We don't do it often — it takes a great deal of energy and computer time, and the results aren't guaranteed — but in this case I prevailed upon the tech to try.

There was no difficulty locating Farraday and Ms. Ghokali: They were in the docking spars at the bottom of the station. That was the first time I felt disturbed at all, mainly because the bottom spars are

the closest thing Sagan Station has to a low-rent neighborhood (though the rents are by no means low), and I couldn't imagine why they should have chosen to go there. After a moment's thought, I put a call through to Dalyeva.

"Greetings, Mr. Burke. What can I do for you?"

"Something small, actually. Something ridiculous, really," I said, although even as I said it I began to feel that it might not be so ridiculous. I checked Ms. Ghokali and Farraday's position. "Could you send a man down to the lower docking spars, to the neighborhood of slips 50 to 52? I'm interested in a young couple, an Anglo male and an Indian female."

"You want them taken in?" Dalyeva asked, quite seriously.

"Lord, no," I laughed. "Just make sure they're all right, and if possible hurry them along to the *Mauritania*. Tell the young lady that her uncle is looking for her."

"Anything to oblige," she said, very politely refraining from asking questions. A small frown creased her forehead though; her head was tilted away from the phone and she was consulting some screen I couldn't see. "50 to 52, eh? That's a quiet area. We've only got one ship down there, and it's been docked for over three months. It was forwarded there by its owner, but he hasn't shown up yet."

My mouth went dry. "Really? Look, could you send that man immediately? And tell him I'll meet him there."

MS. GHOKALI TOLD ME THAT she was not in the least bit nervous about going down to the docking spars with Farraday. He had always been a perfect gentleman. In fact, his solid presence at her side laid to rest any worries she might have had about going into the area — she felt sure he would be able to protect her.

As I said, Sagan Station's bottom docking spars are by no means low-rent. But they are a far cry from the sunny uplands inside the main body of the station, a warren of clean but confusing passageways and service corridors, fueling pits and chandlers' shops, and the hostels and bars that cater to deckhands and crews.

Farraday led the way through the spars with remarkable ease, threading his way quickly through the confusion of passageways, all the while describing his friend Hancock.

"You'll like him, I'm sure," he said to her, turning into the corridor that led to slips 50 to 52. Only 52 was occupied, at the far end of the spar, and the gantryways to 50 and 51 looked unlit and abandoned. They hadn't seen anyone in the past five minutes or so, but Ms. Ghokali was still oblivious to any danger.

"How do you know him?" she asked him, as they passed slip 51. There was a light over the entrance to 52, but otherwise most of the corridor was dark.

"He's an old friend," Farraday said. The corridor narrowed, and he courteously stepped aside to allow her to precede him. When she half-turned to acknowledge the gesture, she saw the knife.

THE MAURITANIA SO PERFECTLY RESEMBLES THE GREAT OCEAN LINERS of long ago — the atmosphere and the physical surroundings have been so painstakingly recreated — that one often forgets that the passengers themselves have been irrevocably changed. For instance, in its heyday I doubt very much whether the original *Mauritania* would have allowed a young Indian lady like Ms. Ghokali above steerage class. And if they did, she would have been a frail, pampered, hot-house flower of a girl, hardly capable of carrying her own handbag.

Farraday, perhaps, was expecting such a girl. Stranger misconceptions have arisen. Perhaps he expected her to wilt when he showed

her the knife — perhaps he expected her to faint. I'm quite sure he didn't expect her to kick him where she did, or to grab for the knife.

He was much stronger than she was, however, and recovered quickly. So quickly that he had her crushed against the wall of the corridor, the knife to her throat, when the man Dallyeva had sent came charging down the corridor.

The station guard was an excellent shot, and put a dart from his needler into Farraday's upper arm, just as the young man was turning to see who was approaching.

I arrived only a few minutes later, but Farraday was already dead, his face turning dark blue. The station guard stood over him, wide-eyed and aghast.

"These are just anesthetics," he was explaining to Ms. Ghokali, who was taking the whole thing far more calmly than I had any right to expect.

"Mr. Burke," Ms. Ghokali said, more surprised at my appearance, I think, than at anything else in the corridor, "What on earth are you doing here?"

NEEDLESS TO SAY, I SPENT MUCH OF THE NEXT FEW HOURS KICKING myself. True, I had sent the guard who saved Ms. Ghokali's life, but I had nearly done it too late — and that after her uncle had given me ample warning, which I had ignored.

The bluish tinge, Dallyeva guessed, was from a poison capsule, and a preliminary autopsy on Farraday discovered a hollow tooth. Just the sort of thing, Uncle Nirmal loudly pointed out once I returned to the ship with Ms. Ghokali and appraised him of the situation, that a professional assassin would carry. The taped message in Farraday's pocket, claiming responsibility for something called (improbably enough) the Golcondarese Liberation Front, was just fuel for his fire.

"You see!" he shouted, pacing up and down in the sitting room of his suite, while Ms. Ghokali calmly sipped a cup of tea. "She could be dead now! I told you and I told you, but you do not listen! I will complain! Oh, yes! I will complain! My dear niece, almost killed!"

He tore at what little hair remained on his head, stomping across the rug, waving his tumbler of whiskey wildly around the room. I could hardly blame him for being upset, but if this was how he reacted to her survival, I was that much happier that Farraday hadn't killed her.

Ms. Ghokali, though, came to my defense. "Don't be silly, Uncle Nirmal," she said, gazing up at the ceiling as if to summon patience. "How many assassinations do you suppose they have on liners like this? You can hardly blame Mr. Burke for not taking you entirely seriously." She had by now learned that I was the ship's detective, and seemed unaccountably impressed with me.

"But I told him!" Uncle Nirmal wailed. "I warned him! And he did nothing!"

"Well, if you told him that way, I quite understand why he didn't listen to you. You sound like a paranoid lunatic."

On the whole, she took the whole thing far better than either her uncle or I. There had been a fit of shaking in the docking spar corridor, and a little bit of hyperventilating, but no tears — and no recriminations.

"Mr. Burke saved my life as much as that guard did, and we should be grateful. There will be no complaint. No," she went on, when Uncle Nirmal started to protest angrily, "no. There will be no complaint. Let's just get on with our journey."

Uncle Nirmal merely bit his lip and scowled at me.

THE MAURITANIA WAS ONLY A FEW HOURS LATE LEAVING SAGAN STATION. I called some stewards and told them to empty Farraday's cabin and bring the contents to Dallyeva's office; the two of us went through them and found exactly nothing.

When we heard the preliminary report of Farraday's self-poisoning, we knew there was little point to keeping the ship docked any longer. An assassin who goes to such lengths to escape being captured alive isn't going to leave a very clear trail, and the *Mauritania* couldn't wait for a full-scale investigation.

In any case, neither Cunard's nor Sagan Station's directors would

want much publicity from the whole affair, so Dallyeva and I parted, both promising to do our quiet best to look into things. By the time the *Mauritania* was on her return run some three weeks later, Dallyeva had positively identified Farraday both as a contract assassin wanted in three systems and as the owner of the Sun Lover, which he had had forwarded to Sagan three months before, presumably for his escape. Beyond that, she had nothing.

I had considerably more.

I KNOW THAT THIS DOESN'T SEEM LIKE THE SORT OF ZEN EXERCISE I was talking about earlier. After all, Ms. Ghokali and her uncle were quite aware that Farraday had tried to kill her, and her survival had more to do with luck than with my skill as a detective.

That she was still alive, and that the attack was a closely kept secret, were not consoling thoughts to me. At my request, the captain assigned a steward to watch Ms. Ghokali's cabin for the rest of the voyage, and she gracefully agreed to my attending her during the day.

We spent a great deal of time in the Forward Lounge. I was not particularly good company, I'm afraid — by turns I berated myself for not listening to Uncle Nirmal and ransacked my memory for missed clues. What annoyed me most was that I could not see what I had missed. Farraday had been very good, insinuating himself into her company right before me, and I had never thought him more than a gold digger.

Ms. Ghokali commented on that — on the ease with which he had created a bond with her, and on how prepared he was.

"Those terrorists must be very well-organized," she said at one point, leaning over the arm of her club chair and tapping my elbow. When she wished to discuss the attack she did so in a low whisper, even when we had the lounge to ourselves. "Mr. Farraday seemed ready to tell me everything I wanted to know."

This was three days out from Sagan Station, a day from the final hyperspace jump to Golcondar, and I had by then made her tell me everything she could remember about her conversations with him.

"Yes," I said. "But I imagine he was very well-prepared. He was probably ready to discuss any subject you might be interested in." I was in a particularly bad mood that morning, the thought that I had almost let this beautiful young girl be murdered was very strong in my mind. I remember thinking, *If only I had listened to her uncle! Why didn't I listen to him?*

And then she said: "Oh, I'm sure — but then, that he should know so much about Golcondar, and that I should so very much want to know about it. Uncle Nirmal gave me none of that sort of information, though I asked and asked."

Thoughts can sometimes click; the right pattern of sentences, the right conjunction of words and phrases. I went very still, but she did not notice, turning back to her reader and the ethnography on the lives of emigrant workers that Farraday had helped her buy.

THOUGHTS CLICK, AND PATTERNS EMERGE. WHY HADN'T MS. GHOKALI'S uncle given her the information she requested? And why was Farraday so well-supplied with just that sort of information?

The answer was obvious, of course, and so far-fetched that it both chilled me and made me want to laugh. Why would Uncle Nirmal want to have his niece assassinated? My first answer was that, of course, he had not. He had warned me about it, after all — so to suspect him was ridiculous. But then I had thought Farraday harmless.

I sat silent in the Forward Lounge for some time, staring blindly out the window at the empty space outside of Sagan system, mulling the whole thing over, trying not to get carried away.

Farraday knew just what Ms. Ghokali's uncle wouldn't tell her. The message he had clearly meant to leave with her dead body was irrelevant — it was his voice on the tape, after all, and misdirection is a wonderful thing. Nirmal Ghokali's warning was not so easily discarded, though. Ms. Ghokali had given me the answer to that.

"If you told him that way," she had said, "I quite understand why he didn't listen to you. You sound like a paranoid lunatic." And he had, hadn't he? So much so that I spent more time thinking he was one of the spoiled rich than looking after his niece.

I was well aware that I might be indulging in my own form of paranoia, so I resolved to proceed carefully.

"I wonder, Ms. Ghokali," I said, clearing my throat, "did your uncle know you were going ashore at Sagan Station?"

She looked up from her reader, smiling quizzically. "Of course. I told him at breakfast."

"Did you tell him who with?"

She blushed dusky roses. "No, I didn't. I knew he disapproved of Mr. Farraday, and I didn't wish to upset him."

"Ah. Strange that he didn't ask."

"Yes," she murmured, turning her gaze out on the stars. "If he had, and I'd told him, this whole thing might have been avoided." I made a noncommittal noise in the back of my throat, and she turned back to me with a gentle smile. "Still, Mr. Burke, you and I are in no position to play 'What If.' After all, my uncle did warn us, and we didn't listen, did we?"

I nodded ruefully. A little self-effacement is a wonderful form of misdirection. "I didn't, that's certain. And I should have. I can't tell you how sorry I am that I didn't, Ms. Ghokali." She shrugged and smiled. "But I didn't know your uncle had warned you about Farraday being an assassin."

"Oh, he didn't," she said, blushing again. "He only told me he disapproved of him, which was probably the best way to get me to speak to Mr. Farraday in the first place. If my uncle had only told me the truth, instead of trying to shelter me, none of this would have happened. I've already spoken to him about it, and he's assured me he'll never keep something that important from me again."

Really, she was an amazing young woman. To treat an attempt on her life so lightly, but still take the appropriate steps, avoiding both paralysis and bravado. She would not expose herself to danger again, but nor would she cringe in her cabin.

I was most impressed.

ASSUME THAT NIRMAL GHOKALI had deliberately created a situation in which his niece would be open to Farraday's advances. He had not supplied her with the sort of information which, as both a well-trained manager and a student of sociology, she would want. He had ignored repeated requests for that sort of information. He had also, according to Ms. Ghokali, disapproved of Farraday in the sort of manner most calculated to arouse a young person's interest. Finally, he had warned me about Farraday in the manner most calculated to make me ignore the warning.

Assume that he was not the self-centered pompous man he appeared to be, and he became quite a clever plotter. Farraday would have killed Ms. Ghokali and escaped in the *Sun Lover*, leaving Nirmal Ghokali quite rightly claiming that he had warned the authorities (such as they are).

Assume all that, and you will be where I was — which was nowhere.

I had no proof and, more importantly, I was unclear as to his motivation. Why would Nirmal Ghokali wish to kill his niece? To my surprise, that turned out to be a relatively easy thing to figure out. When Ms. Ghokali went to dress for dinner, I turned her over to one of the *Mauritania's* smarter stewards and went back to my cabin, to look carefully through the passenger clippings I had assembled before the trip began.

It was very simple, really: Nirmal Ghokali was not just her chapereone for the trip — he had run the family's business on Golcondar IV while she was still in her minority. Family corporations, particularly the Asian ones, are very odd, tending to parcel out divisions and

subsidiaries as legalized inheritances, with long lists of heir-designates and next-in-lines. Just as important, managing a distant colonial subsidiary with a low level of political development like Golcondar IV is a common way to make a not-entirely legal fortune.

My assumption was Uncle Nirmal did not like being put out of a very cushy job by his niece and had decided to put her out of the way. Given the World League's dim view of terrorism, he may have hoped to ruin the Golcondarese application for sovereignty by blaming the murder on them.

I went to Ms. Ghokali's cabin to pick her up for dinner, feeling quite pleased with myself. The right answers to a few innocent questions would give me a perfectly reasonable motive.

She came to the door in a truly remarkable sari of deep blue. I gave her my arm as we headed for the dining room, and asked a few questions.

"You know, Ms. Ghokali, after I first met your uncle, I did some research on your family organization, but I must confess that I was a little confused — I don't know much about business. Would you mind clearing up a few things for me?"

She smiled. "Not at all, Mr. Burke. I imagine you are wondering why someone so young is going out to run such a large business."

I smiled back sheepishly. "I was going to save that for last, but since you bring it up"

"I don't know how much you know about family corporations," she began, and by the time we reached the dining room, she had given me a very precise, very easy-to-follow summary of everything I already knew about family corporations. She had also, however, explained that while, at age fourteen, she had been sixth in line for the Golcondar IV division, a series of natural deaths and unfortunate accidents had left her the sole heir at age fifteen. The deaths and accidents all sounded entirely innocent to me, but they had conspired to leave Nirmal Ghokali as his niece's only close relation without a current position.

"You must understand that the Ghokalis are also a matriarchal family corporation," she said as I pulled out her chair. "Which means that under ordinary circumstances my uncle would never have been given a position of such responsibility. He might have been a subdivisinal manager or something like that, but never a full division head. But there was no one free and of age in my branch of the family, and so an exception was made. It was only for three years, of course, and by all accounts Uncle Nirmal has done very well — but I imagine there were quite a few sighs of relief around the directors' table back in Bangalore when I turned eighteen."

There were a few other passengers at the table, but her uncle had not yet arrived, so I pressed on.

"So the whole thing is entirely hereditary, and males can't take high positions — imagine that! But tell me, who is in line after you? I mean, has the company figured out the lines of descent beyond you?"

"Yes," Ms. Ghokali said, "in fact, it has been figured out for quite some time. The problem is that the next-in-lines for this position are all well underage. My third cousin, Rita Ghokali, is my direct heir, and she is only ten."

"What would happen — pardon me for asking — but what would happen if Farraday had been successful?"

She shrugged, not in the least bothered by the question. "I suppose Uncle Nirmal would have had to take over as guardian again, at least until Rita came of age."

Just then, Nirmal Ghokali arrived, sitting heavily across the table from us. Ms. Ghokali greeted him warmly. He scowled back.

"Promila. Mr. Burke." He nodded disdainfully at me.

I smiled back.

DINNER PASSED VERY PLEASANTLY. MS. GHOKALI SPARKLED QUIETLY, setting a light tone that belied the fact that only a few days before she had been stalked by an assassin. The entire table was charmed by her, and I must say that I can rarely remember a time when I have dined so pleasantly on a Cunard ship. Her uncle, however, remained aloof, grunting now and then, passing the things he was asked for and responding curtly to questions. After dinner, he stumped off to his cabin.

I was quite sure now that he, not some mythical Golcondarese terrorist group, had hired Farraday. The problem was finding proof. Not enough proof to try him, mind you — a trial would be highly embarrassing for both myself and Cunard's directors. Besides, that kind of proof is enormously difficult to find, and I was by no means sure that it even existed.

No, what I needed was enough proof to give me leverage, enough to push very gently. But what?

WE LEFT NORMAL SPACE OUTSIDE SAGAN SYSTEM RIGHT ON SCHEDULE, and were on the third and last day of the hyperdrive passage when I had my idea. I had spent the previous two days mostly sitting by Ms. Ghokali's side in the Forward Lounge, wracking my brain and not coming up with even a way to proceed.

If I had been a normal police detective, or even a private detective planetside, I would have been busy checking the wires for money transfers, tracking down Farraday's accounts and trying to find a trail to his employer. But I was stuck on the *Mauritania*, deep in hyperspace — and I had to have an answer before we reached Golcondar. (Dalyeva informed me later that she had spent three days in just such a search, and run into an untangleable mess of blind alleys, anonymous accounts, front companies, and dead ends.)

I was beside myself, I don't mind saying, frustrated and a little frantic. Once we reached Golcondar, Ms. Ghokali would be beyond what little protection I could afford her, and her uncle would be beyond my reach. I had to have my leverage before he left the ship, and to get leverage I needed some evidence connecting him to Farraday.

The window in the Forward Lounge was showing a video of the Sagan dust cloud, and Ms. Ghokali was explaining what she had learned from the display on Sagan Station when I had my first inkling.

She finished describing how the clouds looked in infrared, and lapsed into a musing silence, one long finger tapping her lips. "So strange," she murmured after a while. "If that guard hadn't come at just that moment"

I was in an irritable mood, annoyed at myself for not having come up with a way to trap her uncle, and I thought privately that the guard could have come much sooner. After all, I arrived only a few minutes after he did, and I sent him.

And then I thought why I had sent him: because the PLS had connected Farraday and Ms. Ghokali in an unsavory part of the station, and it made me nervous.

It was by no means guaranteed — why should Farraday and his employer ever have met on the ship? — but it lifted my spirits enormously for a moment. I called a steward to stay with Ms. Ghokali, excused myself, and ran to the PLS office.

The first thing the tech told me was: "No way, Mr. Burke. Not today. You know we can't do a search like that in 'drive." He was right: I did know that. In my excitement at having a useful idea, however, I had ignored the fact. Hyperdrive navigation requires a vast amount of computing power, and all unnecessary ship's systems were shut down. The PLS would work for finding a single passenger at any given time, but the sort of search I was requesting — following two passengers over the length of the voyage — was out of the question.

"Right, right. But look, as soon as we're out of 'drive, I want that search done. First priority."

He agreed, and I stalked back to the Forward Lounge.

YOU CAN IMAGINE MY FRUSTRATION AND ANXIETY THROUGH THE REST of the day. The video screen in the window of the Forward Lounge still worked, as did all the ship's libraries to which the passengers had access. Anything that caters to the passengers is a necessary system on a Cunard liner — while the one system I needed to prove a man an attempted murderer was offline.

I waited, though, gritting my teeth and keeping Ms. Ghokali company. The worst of it was, as we got closer to leaving hyperdrive, she started to think more and more about her arrival at Golcondar IV, and she started wondering about the people she thought had paid for her assassination.

"Why would they do such a thing? They don't know me; I'm no

threat to them. We're far better employers than most colony-owners. Sovereignty I can understand — who wouldn't wish to have some say in their government? But assassination"

I shook my head at the appropriate moments and clucked convincingly, all the while glad that her uncle had made himself scarce. He wasn't at dinner that evening either, and that was a good thing. I'm afraid that if I had seen him I would have leapt on him. He was middle-aged, short and stout; fired up as I was, I think I could have taken him.

WE WERE BACK IN NORMAL SPACE FOR ONLY AN HOUR, A DAY'S TRAVEL from Golcondar, when the PLS tech finished the search.

"They cross a couple of times," he said, running his finger along the screen, which showed a three-dimensional model of the ship. There were six points showing where the two DNA imprints had crossed paths, color-coded for the date. Five were in the dining room, from evenings when Farraday had dined at the Ghokalis table.

And one, for which I pounded the PLS technician on the back, was located in Nirmal Ghokali's cabin. The date was the night before we docked at Sagan Station.

THIS WAS WHERE MY JOB BECAME MORE LIKE A ZEN EXERCISE — THE one in which the archer is blindfolded and shoots at the target. The fact that Nirmal Ghokali had met Farraday in his room the night before the murder was by no means hard evidence. I myself could spin a dozen plausible tales to explain it, the least of which was that Ghokali had met with Farraday to warn him away from his niece.

The trick was not to allow Ghokali to explain it away.

I left a steward with Ms. Ghokali in the Forward Lounge for the sake of form, although I did not think it necessary — I was going to be with the man who wanted her dead, after all — and went up to her uncle's suite.

It was just a little after noon ship time, and as the PLS had told me, Uncle Nirmal took a sauna every day before lunch. I caught him dressed in a bathrobe, freshly steamed and quite relaxed.

"Yes?" he snapped. "What is it now? Have you come to apologize?"

It's amazing how feeling ahead of the game gives you a certain serenity. My chuckle was completely serene. "I'm afraid I have to trouble you for a few moments, Mr. Ghokali. I'm going to have to make a couple of reports, and I need to check some things with you."

"Now? Can't it wait?"

I brushed gently past him into the suite, hands clasped lightly behind my back. "I'm afraid not. I'll need to forward a report to the local authorities as soon as possible, so they can get to work."

He clutched his belly protectively, as if I'd fainted at it. "Get to work? Work on what?"

"Why, looking for whoever's responsible, of course." Again, the serene chuckle.

"But he's dead! You said so!"

"Farraday is dead, Mr. Ghokali. But someone must have hired him."

This stopped him for a moment, still clutching his little potbelly. Finally, he lowered his head, nodding, and gestured me to a seat. He sat himself, doing a very credible, if sullen, 'let's get on with this' expression.

"Very well, go on. Ask your questions."

"Thank you. I promise, it won't take but a moment. There are only a few questions. When did you first suspect that Farraday was an assassin?"

"From the moment Promila mentioned him to me. He sounded suspicious."

"So you were worried that she might be targeted before she came aboard the *Mauritania*?"

"Yes."

"But you didn't mention it to her. I assume you didn't want to burden her with it — is that right?"

He nodded eagerly. "Exactly! It was just a suspicion, after all, and she is so very young."

"Yes," I murmured, more to myself than to him. "Very young. And

Continued on page 94

Experience space battle adventures with a newer, better *Silent Death*.



Conquering the universe just became a little easier with Iron Crown's revised edition of *Silent Death*. Art by Kevin Ward.

SILENT DEATH: THE NEXT MILLENNIUM IS THE second edition of Iron Crown Enterprises' popular space combat game, *Silent Death*. Set fifty years after the original game, *SDTNM* (\$50.00 for the boxed set) makes some minor, but important changes in the rules, adds several new optional rules, and adjusts the point values of the spaceships to bring them in line with the brand new ship design rules. What this second edition doesn't change is how easy *Silent Death* is to learn and how much fun it is to play.

Unlike Task Force Games' longer running and vastly more complex *Star Fleet Battles* (which models ship-to-ship combat in the universe of Paramount's *Star Trek: The Original Series*), *SDTNM* is not set in a licensed, media property universe. The scenarios are set in a background of the designers' imaginings (Kevin Barrett, Matt Frobeck, and Tim Schmidt). Long time science fiction readers will notice the inspirations for many of these imaginings (particularly the works of Frank Herbert, Dan Simmons, and Poul Anderson), but there are no direct steals. Since it is a background that will be unfamiliar to new players, the authors take the first forty-eight pages of the rule book to explain it, exactly twice as many pages as it takes for them to explain the game's basic rules.

The heart of *Silent Death*'s ease of play is its ship displays. These show a graphic of the ship, plus all its weapons and their characteristics. The displays also print the ships' damage tracks, their movement and defense characteristics, and their crews' skill levels. Ammunition use and damage taken are both marked off on the display. In other words, almost everything needed to play

each ship is right in front of you.

The basic rules for *Silent Death* are extremely well-organized. They follow the sequence of play, presenting each concept as it occurs and returning to it as necessary. The turn sequence is launching warheads (torpedoes or missiles), moving, resolving torpedo attacks, resolving cannon attacks, resolving missile attacks.

The difference between torpedoes and missiles is that torpedoes are smart drones that merely need to have their target designated. They will then follow it, moving like any other ship, until they strike their target or are destroyed. Missiles are short-range, high-velocity drones that require their gunners to lock onto the target, but always hit at the end of the turn in which they are launched.

Movement is on a hex grid and is only in two dimensions. Depending on their design, ships have between six and twenty movement points, with most ships tending toward the top of the scale. Many space combat games use an impulse system of movement, where each ship moves a hex at a time across the map in a stagger sequence (ship A moves one hex, ship B moves one, and so on). *Silent Death* uses an all-at-once system. Players roll for initiative and the loser moves his first ship, using all of its movement points that he wishes. Then the winner moves his first ship. Players alternate moving ships until they have all moved. Since firing is done after movement, the importance of winning initiative is immediately obvious. It does no good to line up an enemy ship for a lethal ion ram blast if he moves after you and takes the chance to leave your firing arc.

Torpedoes always move after their targets do, in effect always winning initiative. During their resolutions, phase torpedoes may be dodged, shot down, decoyed, or jammed (although not all at once), but when these measures fail, the drones can do devastating amounts of damage. Otherwise uneven scenarios are often equalized by adding or subtracting torpedoes from the combatants.

Cannon fire is resolved with one dice roll that is then read two different ways. Each gun has a number of base dice to which is added another die, based on the gunner's skill. To hit an enemy ship, the dice are rolled and the total is compared with the enemy's defensive value. If the gun hits, then the same die roll is used to compute the damage, but the dice are read in a different manner.

Weapons are identified as doing one of four types of damage, low, medium, high, or all. With "all," the dice result is simply added together. For "low," the lowest result on any die is taken. If there is a tie, the dice are added. It's simpler than it sounds. For example, if three dice came up 3, 4, and 6 and the weapon was a low damage one, then it would do 3 points. If the roll was 3, 3, and 6, then the weapon would do 6 points. "High" is the same, except the highest dice is used; "medium" uses the medium die.

Once the damage total is computed, the enemy ship's damage reduction is subtracted from it and the remaining points are applied to the enemy ship's damage track.

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Light fighters can have as few as 20 boxes in their damage track, while heavy fighters can have 100. Boxes are marked off left to right, one box for each point of damage. Losing some boxes results in additional effects such as damage to weapons and reductions in movement or damage reduction. There also are "critical hit" boxes that force another die roll to check for additional effects, everything from defense values falling by one to complete destruction of the ship.

With only the above summary, it is possible to sit down and begin playing a game. This is *Silent Death's* greatest strength; fifteen minutes after picking up the rules, you can be playing your first game. By the end of that game, you will have mastered the basics and can begin to explore which ships, scenarios, and optional rules you prefer.

Among the ships, my favorite turned out to be a medium fighter called the *Salamander*. In a game where a few bad initiative rolls can mean never seeing an enemy in the firing arch of your best weapon before it has been shot to pieces, the *Salamander* provides the best mix of speed (it can still outrun torpedoes when one third damaged), defense, torpedoes, and firing arcs in the game. Most of the ships have their advantages, but the *Salamander* has the fewest disadvantages.

To achieve its simplicity and ease of play, *Silent Death* has had to sacrifice any attempt at realism. Start with the fact that the game is set in space but is played in only two dimensions. There are optional rules to add a third, but even these are very simplified. For example, Pythagoras is ignored; range is computed by adding the number of hexes of distance to the difference in the ship's levels. There is no scale to the game either for time or distance; a turn is just a turn and a hex is just a hex. Thus there is no way to tell if the rule that allows only one ship per hex is silly or if the hexes really are that small. Just how fast are the ships really moving? It's impossible to figure out. No one ever runs out of fuel and the movement costs make much more sense for a game set in an environment with friction and gravity (like, say, *Car Wars*) than they do for a game set in deep space.

As for the background itself, its most interesting element is a race called the Grubs, whose ships don't actually appear in *Silent Death: The Next Millennium*. The Grubs are the doomsday device of this future history. An insect race, they lie dormant on uninhabitable planets until any nearby war passes a certain threshold of violence. At that point, the Grubs awaken, swarm, and are drawn to the violence, attacking both sides with genocidal ferocity. There are no scenarios for combat with Grubs in *SDTNM*, but as a part of the background, they do provide the reason why galactic war is limited to the small, fighter-based actions that *Silent Death* portrays.

All in all, *Silent Death* is a fun game. Easy to learn, easy to play, and more social than anything on your computer. □



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BOOKS

Continued from page 18

the atevi as Bren does, and see why they need to take their place as the leading voice on their own planet, even as they share space below and above with the human colonists. Cherryh creates a very believable alien race in the atevi and draws the characters that illustrate them very well. Read slowly and enjoy.

Richard Parks

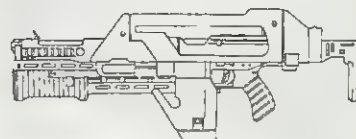
RECENT AND RECOMMENDED

Quotes are better than peanuts — they're just as addictive, but they don't make you thirsty. That's why *Science Fictionisms* (Gibbs Smith, paperback, 144 pages, \$5.95), edited by William Rostler, is such a welcome read. *Bartlett's Quotations* has always been out there to gather words of wisdom for those non-genre writers, but it was up to Rostler, who has published more than 3,000 stories and articles, to compile a similar list of quotes from SF writers. All of the great SF writers are included, such as Robert Heinlein, Ray Bradbury, Issac Asimov, Ursula K. LeGuin, and dozens of others. It will only take repeating a few of these to convince you that you ought to own a copy. For example, from Arthur C. Clarke: "A faith that cannot survive collision with the truth is not worth many regrets." And David Gerrold: "Say what you will, lightning is one helluva murder weapon. The only problem, of course, is aiming it." And finally (Stop us before we repeat them all!), Roger Zelazny: "If I ever discover a definition of science fiction, I shall immediately attempt to violate it." Pick up your own copy. Once you start reading, you'll find it impossible to stop.

Regular readers of this magazine will be familiar with the name Paul Di Filippo. Five of his wonky and inventive stories have so far appeared in our pages. His critical reviews have always reflected a passionate wisdom and understanding of the place any work under consideration has to the larger history of SF. He has twice been a Nebula finalist, and last year he won an award for Best Short Story from the British Science Fiction Association. (Also, his novella "Spondulix" came in second in our Readers' Poll, as per this issue's editorial.) The publication of *The Steampunk Trilogy* last year was his long-awaited first hardback publication, and was warmly welcomed by the critics. Having started the steampunk subgenre, Di Filippo now moves on to stake his claim on another patch of SF canvas with *Ribofunk* (Four Walls Eight Windows, hardcover, 304 pages, \$20.00), a collection of tales in his genetically engineered future where biology is the cutting edge science that rules our lives. Gathered here are all of Di Filippo's tales in this universe, including two never before seen stories, "The Bad Splice" and "Blankie." Di Filippo's postmodern imagination knows no boundaries, and all readers should join along for his unique journey. □

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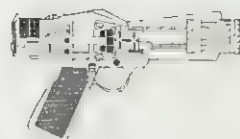
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GOLCANDER RUN

Continued from page 89

with such weighty responsibilities. Only eighteen and running an entire division. You used to run the division, didn't you, Mr. Ghokali? Of course, you're much older, much more experienced. Hard to believe they'd put aside someone like you for someone like Ms. Ghokali." His face darkened. "Oh, excuse me—I didn't mean to offend. I forgot that your family is matriarchal. To you, it must be entirely natural. But tell me, if you suspected Farraday from the beginning, why didn't you come to me earlier?"

He pounced on that. "It did me no good to come to you at all! You were no use at all!"

"No, I'm afraid I wasn't," I said, assuming an appropriately mournful face. "Still, I'm surprised you didn't come right away. Were you completely sure that he was an assassin? Did you perhaps think he might be harmless?"

Ghokali considered that, his eyes darting from the print of the old *Lusitania* above my right shoulder to the blank screen of the viewer above my left. "Yes," he said, drawing the word out. "That is exactly it. I was not sure, not completely sure. He might have been a harmless person, and I was not sure."

"Just giving Ms. Ghokali a little tutoring on Golcondar IV?"

"Exactly! I thought he might be just giving her a little tutoring."

"Supplying her with the information you hadn't?" I supplied, full of cheer and help.

"What?" His eyes fixed on mine. "What are you saying?"

"Oh, Ms. Ghokali was just saying how much she'd bothered you for that sort of information, and you'd never gotten it for her."

"It was not available! It was not relevant!"

"Of course not," I said, the soul of reason. "I can't imagine what she'd want with it myself. Now, I understand why you wouldn't tell Ms. Ghokali that she was threatened, but I'm curious why you didn't hire any protection—bodyguards, that sort of thing." He stared blankly at me for a moment. I winced. "Oh, please, excuse me again. Stupid question. If you hired bodyguards, she'd know something was wrong. Never mind."

My retreat had given him back some courage; he stood, hands on his hips. "Why didn't you think about these things before you came? I wish to go to lunch now. Will you please excuse me?"

He stood, so I did as well, holding out both hands to placate him. "Just two more things, Mr. Ghokali. When your niece told you at breakfast that she was going ashore at Sagan Station, why didn't you ask her who with?"

He froze.

"I mean, after all, if you suspected she was the target of an assassination, and had already warned her to stay away from Farraday, why did you let her go ashore without asking who she was going with? Did you think she was going alone?" He nodded,

and seemed to be having trouble speaking. "But if you thought she was going alone, why did you let her? After all, you thought she might be assassinated, Mr. Ghokali. It seems a great risk."

"I was preoccupied," he stammered after a few moments. "I wasn't paying attention. I don't know."

I went up to him and put a consoling hand on his arm. "Please, Mr. Ghokali, calm down. This isn't an interrogation; I just need some general facts. For instance, how do you explain what you and Farraday discussed when he came here the night before he tried to kill your niece?"

This, I will ask you to note, was not a lie. I never said I knew what they discussed. I'll grant you that I allowed Ghokali to infer it, but I never outright said it, and a moment's reflection might have shown him that other things could be inferred from the construction of the sentence. It's a small thing, but even in a good cause, I don't like to lie.

Ghokali, as I had hoped, did not allow himself a moment's reflection. He broke down, in a rather messy and annoying way, wailing and moaning, among other things, that he had not meant it, that Farraday should never have come to his cabin, should never have asked for more money, and knew nothing of the warning Ghokali had given me. That, it appeared, was Ghokali's addition to Farraday's otherwise excellent plan, and he had thought himself very clever in thinking of it.

The most difficult part was convincing him that I didn't want a bribe. He didn't offer me one because he thought it might save him, but because he thought I expected it. Throughout our halting conversation he would occasionally screw up his eyes and cock his head at me, as if to make sure that he had really heard me correctly. "You don't want money at all?" he said at one point.

"No," I replied patiently. "What I want you to understand is that I have a number of friends in the World League's law enforcement arm, and should I ever find that your niece has come to any harm, I will forward them a copy of this conversation. You know, I think, how far they can reach?"

He nodded vigorously, eager to cooperate.

"Good. Cunard Space Lines takes a very dim view of murderers in general, and most particularly those who practice their trade aboard our ships. My suggestion, Mr. Ghokali, is that you do your very best to put this behind you, and be as helpful to your niece as you can. If you're not" I pulled the tape recorder from my pocket and shook it meaningfully. "Good day, Mr. Ghokali."

I'm sure my smile looked smug and gloating to him, but to me it was pure serenity.

THERE IS VERY LITTLE MORE TO TELL. THE *Mauritania* docked at Golcondar Station and Ms. Ghokali and her uncle disembarked like everyone else. She thanked me politely for my services, and saved me the embarrassment of having to refuse a tip by not offering

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one (though I know she tipped the chambermaid handsomely). I will not soon forget how very pretty she looked, strolling down the gangplank, her uncle trailing behind like a sullen and skulking dog.

We stayed at Golcondar Station for three days, gathering passengers for the return trip, and just before we left I sent the tape and a brief note to Ms. Ghokali.

On the way back I checked in with Delyeva at Sagan Station, and heard how good a trail-hider Farraday had been. I explained the situation, and she was a little surprised at my letting Nirmal Ghokali go free. That was her police experience talking; when I told her why I had done it, she began to see that it made sense.

Trials mean publicity, after all. Neither Sagan Station nor Cunard would like it to be known that assassinations can be attempted in their facilities. I'm also sure that Ms. Ghokali wouldn't want her family corporation's internal squabbles brought to light, or the ease with which she was deceived.

When I next returned to Golcondar Station, there was a little note waiting for me which fully justified my opinion of Ms. Ghokali.

Mr. Burke, it read, I must say that your message quite stunned me. At first I thought your accusations ridiculous; then, when I listened to the tape, I thought your suggestions were. However, on reflection I have come around to your point of view. My uncle is now the manager of a very small factory near the South Pole of Golcondar IV. One of the unfortunate drawbacks of his position is that he has almost no access to communications tech, and is thus quite isolated. I imagine the intense cold and relatively primitive living conditions are not pleasant either.

With his help, I have looked very carefully at his transactions as my guardian, and together we were lucky enough to discover a number of bank accounts that he had overlooked. These have quite nicely raised the divisions' balance sheet and funded a number of local charities. All in all, a very satisfactory ending.

Though I can imagine no more congenial place to work than the Mauritania, I would like to assure you that should you ever wish to leave their service, the Ghokalis would quite happily employ you.

THIS WAS ALL A FEW YEARS AGO, AND THE MAURITANIA no longer does the Golcondar run, so I have not been out that way in over two years. However, I recently heard that Golcondar IV was granted entry to the World League as a sovereign planet, and that a Promila Ghokali was a member of the government — Commerce Minister, I believe. A brief glance at the Ghokali annual report tells me that Uncle Nirmal still runs his frigid factory despite, as the report puts it, "constant howling blizzards, inhuman conditions, and frostbite so severe he has lost a number of fingers and toes."

I definitely think I got it right. □

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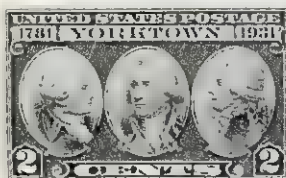
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MOVIES

Continued from page 26

becomes an avid reader. Ironically, the anti-censorship message of the movie is marred by a scathing attack on television, but the story of the film will hold your interest, thanks to Werner's sympathetic performance. An in-joke features an issue of *Cahiers du Cinema* (the film criticism journal Truffaut wrote for before becoming a director) in a pile of burning books.

12:01 (1993, made for television, 92 minutes, color) is based on an Academy Award-nominated short film by the same name. Jonathan Silverman plays a mild-mannered clerk at a research facility who unwittingly becomes trapped in a time-loop, where he is destined to relive the same twenty-four hours over and over again. As he seeks to solve the dilemma, he falls in love with a researcher (Helen Slater) who may hold the key to the time loop. While *Groundhog Day*, which came out the same year, treats the exact same idea as a fantasy, *12:01* (which, it should be noted, was released first) takes a more science fictional approach. Silverman and Slater are both appealing, and the movie generates considerable tension in its second half. Look for Martin Landau in a supporting role. Well worth checking out.

Alphaville (1965, French, 95 minutes, black-and-white) was written and directed by French New Wave filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard. Essentially a collision between film noir thriller and science fiction dystopia story, *Alphaville* follows the private eye Lemmy Caution (played by popular French actor Eddie Constantine) as he travels to the futuristic city of the title, seeking Dr. Von Braun (Howard Vernon), a scientist who created the computer Alpha 60, which controls both the city and its dronelike inhabitants. Godard uses the story as a springboard for examinations of semiotics and the dehumanizing effect of technology, and the results won't appeal to every taste. Godard chose a French Algerian actor with a throat disorder to perform the distorted, gravelly voice of the sinister Alpha 60, with memorable results.

1984 (1984, British, 115 minutes, color) has got to be one of the most depressing movies ever made, which is a testament to director Michael Radford's determination to capture the grim oppression at the heart of George Orwell's classic novel. And capture it, he does. The always reliable John Hurt is excellent as Winston Smith, and Richard Burton delivers a disturbingly sinister performance (his last one) as O'Brien, Smith's interrogator at the Ministry of Love. Appropriately gritty production design.

Miracle Mile (1988, 87 minutes, color) is an astonishingly gripping movie, based on an irresistible premise. Anthony Edwards (*ER*) plays a trombonist in Los Angeles who



The Quiet Earth is a thought-provoking take on the "last man on Earth" story.

answers a ringing pay phone in the wee hours of the morning outside an all-night diner. He hears a panicked young man who says he's calling from a nuclear missile silo, that they've just launched their birds, and only seventy minutes remain until the missiles from the Soviet counterstrike hit America. Is the call an elaborate prank? Or is it real? Writer/director Steve de Jarnatt masterfully, relentlessly cranks up the suspense as waves of hysteria radiate outward from the diner. Excellent performances by Edwards, Mare Winningham, Mykel T. Williams, and Denise Crosby, along with a jaw-dropping finale, make *Miracle Mile* a genuine sleeper. Don't miss it.

Solaris (1972, Russian, 165 minutes, color) is a lush, gorgeously photographed adaptation of the novel by Stanislaw Lem. *Solaris* is a gargantuan, oceanlike, apparently intelligent organism inhabiting the surface of an alien planet. Earth has built an airborne station above the organism to study it, but the researchers are suffering from hallucinations and severe depression.

A psychologist (Donatas Banionis) is sent to the station to investigate and determine whether the project should be shut down. Once there, he finds himself confronted by his ex-wife (Natalya Bondarchuk), who committed suicide several years before. The researchers claim she is a "guest," a *Solaris*-induced manifestation of the psychologist's subconscious, and possibly evidence that *Solaris* is attempting to communicate. At nearly three hours, this movie takes its time to set up its central conflict and thematic material, but it's utterly engrossing for most of its length, and the ending is as enigmatic as *Solaris* itself.

A Boy and His Dog (1975, 87 minutes, color) is the cult favorite, based on the award-winning novella by Harlan Ellison. Young punk Don Johnson scavenges the post-apocalypse landscape, accompanied by his intelligent, telepathic dog Blood, until he is lured underground by inhabitants of a bizarre "utopia" (one of whom is played by Jason Robards). There's plenty of black humor, social satire, and a great twist ending in which Johnson finally gets his priorities straight. Written and directed by L.Q. Jones.

The Quiet Earth (1985, New Zealand, 100 minutes, color) is an offbeat take. A scientist (Bruno Lawrence) wakes up one morning to find that every human being on the planet has apparently vanished without a trace. He suspects that the project he's been working on is responsible for disrupting the fabric of reality, and there's evidence that the situation is still unstable. Suffering from loneliness, the scientist attempts to see if there's anyone else out there in the world, and finds a woman (Alison Routledge) and another man, a descendant of Maori warriors (Peter Smith), which sets the gears of the eternal triangle subplot spinning. Geoff Murphy's direction is thought-provoking, and his eye for mood and detail keeps the movie interesting throughout.

Dark Star (1974, 83 minutes, color) is another cult favorite. Begun as a USC film school project and later expanded for theatrical release, *Dark Star* is a collaboration between Dan O'Bannon (*Alien*) and John Carpenter (*Escape From New York*). They co-wrote the screenplay, Carpenter directed, and O'Bannon starred as Sergeant Pinback (as well as providing the voice for a mutinous thermostellar bomb). Three spaced-out astronauts battle cabin fever and malfunctions aboard their ship on their mission to bomb unstable planets. Nominally a spoof of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Dark Star* also serves up hints of movies to come with its beach-ball alien escaping into the air-shafts. The movie looks terrific, despite a shoestring budget.

Enemy Mine (1985, 108 minutes, color), is a movie based on a novella by Barry B. Longyear that was inspired, coincidentally enough, by another movie. Longyear borrowed the idea of *Hell in the Pacific* (with Lee Marvin and Toshiro Mifune) for his story of two soldiers from opposing sides in an interstellar war. Both are stranded on a hostile alien planet, and must overcome their hatred for each other in order to survive. Dennis Quaid is the Earthling and Louis Gossett, Jr. is the reptilian Drac. The movie boasts excellent production values, good performances and Wolfgang Peterson's fine direction, but it fizzled at the box office, nevertheless. Luckily, it's on video, so check it out.

The Brother from Another Planet (1984, 104 minutes, color) is writer/director John Sayles' beguiling story of a mute renegade alien, expressively played by Joe Morton (*Aliens*), who crashlands in Harlem and is accepted by the locals. Morton's Brother, who can heal wounds and fix video machines with a touch of his hand, serves as a perfect foil for a variety of characters, all affectionately observed, and all spouting Sayles' quirky, thoughtful dialogue. Sayles appears in a comedic role as an alien bounty hunter. Funny, imaginative and bittersweet, *The Brother from Another Planet* shows just how good a movie made on a shoestring budget can be. □

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November 1992—Fiction by Castro, O'Neill, Malzberg, Andrews, DiFilippo, Nelson, Webb. Gallery written by Ray Bradbury on the art of Robert McCall.

January 1993—Fiction by Disch, Watt-Evans, Boston/Frazier, Landis/Sinamoto, Cross, Daniel. Essay by Marion Zimmer Bradley. Gallery—James Gurney—*Dinotopia*.

March 1993—Fiction by Ellison, Andrews, Bova, Aldridge, Hirsch. Essay by Harlan Ellison.

May 1993—Fiction by Malzberg, Tilton, Bova, Steele, Anteau. Essay by Robert Silverberg. Gallery—Barlowe.

July 1993—Fiction by Piers Anthony, Sheffield, Shelley, Hogan, Bisson. *Jurassic Park*. Gallery of Jim Burns.

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March 1994—Fiction by Parks, Tiedemann, Popkes, Stableford, Liss, Garnett.

May 1994—Fiction by Benford, DiFilippo, Morresy, Aldridge, O'Neill, Sarrantonio, Gallery of Bob Eggleton art.

July 1994—Fiction by Landis, Rich, Wilber, Malzberg, Shelly, Hood. Gun Control essay by David Brin.

September 1994—Fiction by Marcus, Boston, Wilson, Nelson, Sheskin, Landis, Castro. Essay by Frederik Pohl.

November 94—Fiction by Resnick, DiCharlo, Plerry, Cleary, Moon, Nelson, Brin. Gallery by Harlan Ellison.

January 95—Fiction by Castro, Evans, Steele, Hood, Manison, Clayton. Gallery by Mike Resnick.

March 95—Fiction by Wilbur, Salmonson, Aldridge, Rich, Jeffrey Carver.

May 95—Fiction by DiFilippo, Ben Bova, Rich, Cleary, Benford, Clayton.

July 95—Fiction by Tiedemann, Feeley, Mackay, Hogan, Millitello, Boston, Koolstra.

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CONTRIBUTORS

STEPHEN BAXTER HAS RECEIVED unparalleled praise from Arthur C. Clarke, who called *The Time-Ships*, his most recently published book, "the most outstanding work of imaginative fiction since Stapledon's *Last and First Men* and the best possible contribution to *The Time Machine's* centennial year." His other published novels include *Raft*, *Anti-Ice* and *Flux*. He lives in Buckinghamshire, England with his wife Sandra. Margaret Weis published her first novel *Dragons of Autumn Twilight* in 1984 as part of the *Dragonlance Chronicles*. She is a former advertising director and editor at TSR Books. She is most well-known for her novels in *The Death Gate Cycle* from Bantam, written with Tracy Hickman.

Paul Di Filippo has recently been paying greater attention to the nonfiction side of his literary palette. The *James Guide to Fantasy Writers*, edited by David Pringle and just out from Gale Research, contains his essays on a number of fabulists, including John Barth, Donald Barthelme, Thorne Smith, John Crowley, and others. *The Ultimate Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, due out shortly from Carlton Books, has also been graced with his criticism.

Elizabeth Hand won the World Fantasy Award last year for Best Novella for "Last Summer at Mars Hill." Her novelization of the Terry Gilliam hit movie *12 Monkeys* is currently on sale. She is still hard at work on *Glimmerings*, her next novel due out from Harper Collins. Vincent Di Fate recently painted his dream project, of which he says, "for three weeks I was twelve years old again." His series of thirty-six different dinosaur stamps was released by Grenada and the Grenada Grenadines. His artwork recently appeared on the cover of the laser disc release of the film *The Amazing Mr. X* with Turhan Bey.

Kandis Elliot heads a multimedia prepress facility in scientific illustration and desktop publications at the University of Wisconsin's Department of Botany. Her short stories often incorporate biological sciences, which she has felt under-represented in SF, and have been seen in *IASFM*, *Tomorrow*, *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* and *The Journal of Irreproducible Results*. John

Berkey hopes that you pause during your next stop-over at the Pittsburgh Air Terminal. That's because his twelve-by-six foot mural of a city of the future is hanging there to help you pass the time waiting for your next flight. His most recent collection of artwork is *Painted Space*.

Kathleen Ann Goonan is currently at work on the sequel to her debut novel *Queen City Jazz*. Her most recent novel is *The Bones of Time* (Tor).



Richard Parks



Daniel Hood

CORY DOCTOROW HAS BEEN PUBLISHED in the magazines *On Spec* and *Pulphouse*, as well as the anthology *Air Fish*. He is a graduate of the Clarion Science Fiction Writing Workshop. Lately, he has parlayed his computer expertise into a role as producer of the CD-ROM adaptation of the sadly defunct *Prisoners of Gravity* TV show.

Richard Parks has stories due out in the Esther Friesner-edited "vampires in the arts" anthology *Blood Muse*, as well as the magazines *Abrupt Edge*, *Tomorrow SF*, *Adventures of Sword and Sorcery*, and *Dragon*. His fantasy, "The Ogre's Wife," appeared in our September Issue, and he has recently completed the first draft of a novel. He has been writing criticism for the review magazine *Tangent*. Ken Tunell is a self-taught artist who knew his calling ever since he was a little kid drawing on paper bags with crayons. He made his first sale in high school and his professional career has continued for the past thirteen years, though he only began working in the genre over the past year. His current favorite of his own works is the cover to Holly Lisle and Aaron Allston's *Thunder of the Captains* from Baen.

Daniel Hood has had short stories published in *Dragon* and *Amazing*. Ace has recently bought his third novel *Beggars' Banquet*, which is a sequel to *Fanvilth* and *Wizard's Heir*. Eric T. Baker has been published in *F&SF* and *IASFM*. His agent is currently marketing his first novel, *Kriegspiel*, an SF police procedural set on a fleet of colony ships. He attended the famed Clarion SF Writers Workshop in 1989, and makes his home in Vienna, Virginia with his wife, writer/editor Rachel Russell. □



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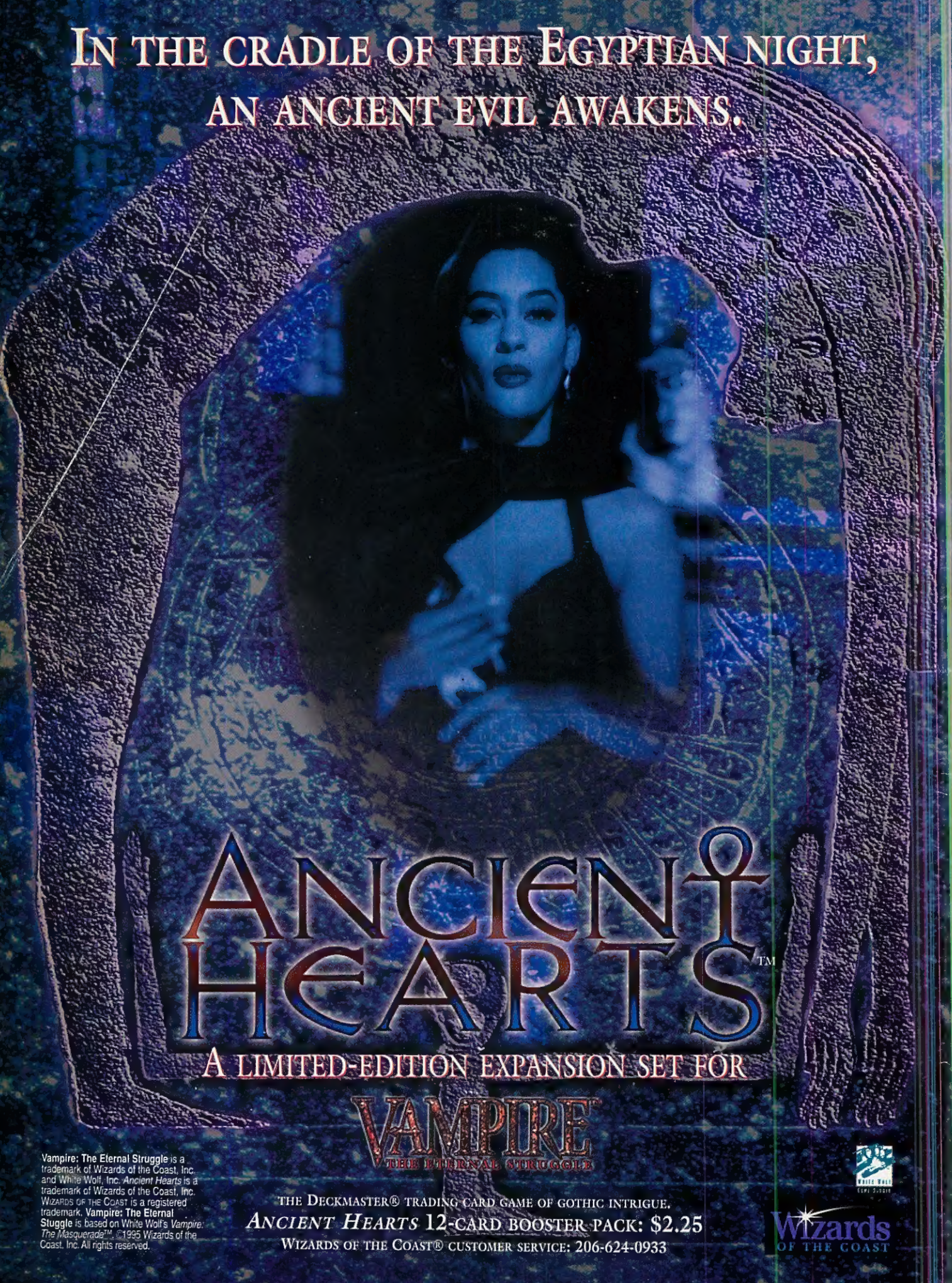


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